

Harry Potter and the Unexpected Inheritance

Chapter 1

The Fire Call

A blast of ice cold water hit Harry Potter in the chest almost knocking him backward. He looked up at his best friend with annoyance. Ron Weasley moved the stream of water to Harry's face.

Harry lifted his arms to cover his head. Still the flow of water streamed over him. He heard Ron's soft laughter.

"Damn it, Ron," said Harry. "I had to teach you how to use that hose."

Ron laughed again. "I think I have the hang of it now," said Ron as he continued to spray Harry with water.

The 16-year-old wizards were the best of friends. The muggle (non magic people) water hose was new to Ron, but not to Harry who had been raised by his muggle Aunt and Uncle who hated him and, in fact, had treated him like a slave (or at the very least, a house elf). But Harry had a better life now. He lived with his godfather now, his parents best friend. And Sirius loved him. Harry was still getting used to having a real home and a family.

Harry reached down into the bucket at his feet and pulled out a soap filled sponge. He hurled it at Ron. It hit Ron in the face and the water stream hitting Harry stopped.

"HARRY! RON!"

Harry turned his dripping head towards the open front door of La Casa Black; his home, and saw Sirius, his godfather, standing on the front porch of the three-story house.

"You're supposed to be washing my bike, not drowning each other," said Sirius.

"Sorry, Sirius," said both Harry and Ron together.

Sirius looked like he was trying to keep himself from laughing. "Yeah right," said Sirius and he turned and went back into the house.

Harry and Ron looked at each other and they both laughed.

Ron threw the sponge back at Harry. Harry caught it but Ron held up the hose.

"Oh, no," said Harry. "*Expellimentus.*"

The hose flew from Ron's hand into Harry's.

"Oh, not fair!" yelled Ron.

But Harry opened the nozzle full blast on Ron.

Since Harry didn't need to use a wand to do magic, his magic wasn't detected by the Dept. of Underage Misuse of Magic.

Once Ron was as soaked as Harry, they got around to washing Sirius' flying motorcycle. Once it was cleaned and dried, they even waxed it.

"You staying for dinner, Ron?" said Harry, wiping his hands on his jeans.

"Can't," said Ron as they started moving the buckets and hose back to the carport. "Love to but Mum said to make sure everyone was home tonight."

"Why?"

"Don't know," said Ron.

Ron grabbed Harry's wrist and pulled out his wand. "What should I be doing?" said Ron after tapping Harry's watch with his wand.

"You're late! Get home." Flashed the watch.

Harry laughed as Ron said good bye and raced across the field between La Casa Black and The Burrow (Ron's home). Harry knew that the hand on the Weasley's clock now showed Ron as "in transit".

They had added several things to that magical clock when he and Sirius had moved next door. Harry had been floored when he saw they had added a hand with his name on it – they could only do this because they had adopted him as part of the family. And they had added a place – La Casa Black.

Harry had been having the best summer of his life. Just listening to Sirius talk to him, playing Quidditch with the Weasleys in the hidden clearing, being able to do his homework in the cool office that he and Sirius shared. Letting their house elves spoil them, which Dobby and Winky did.

Thinking of Dobby made Harry hungry. He pushed Sirius motorcycle off the stand and pushed it up to the carport. Harry looked down at the bike and threw his leg over it and sat down. Harry remembered sitting in front of Sirius as Sirius let him drive it a few weeks ago. He didn't let Harry fly it, but Harry got to drive it.

It had some features that even Sirius didn't know what they did. Harry studied the controls between the handlebars. Harry started it. He looked down at a curious lever and threw it.

A calm serenity fell over him, as if Rowan, his phoenix, was singing to him. He closed his eyes.

Harry, didn't last year teach you anything about controlling that curiosity of yours?

It was his father's voice. Harry only knew it from his memories.

Then a small jolt erupted from the bike. The charge of power threw Harry off the bike to the ground. The motorcycle shut itself off and Harry stared at it.

Harry heard a soft laugh. "All right, Harry?" said Sirius.

Harry had to laugh then too. "Yeah," said Harry dragging himself off the ground. He looked at the bike. "My dad just yelled at me."

"Well serves you right," said Sirius but he threw an arm around Harry's shoulders.

"I know, I know," said Harry. "I should do as I'm told."

"Harry," said Sirius, "You're a good kid, you know that don't you?"

"I guess," said Harry. "Unless you ask Snape."

Sirius laughed. They walked back to the house and as they entered, the phone rang. Sirius had gotten the phone for Harry so Hermione could call him but Aunt Petunia had called once, which had shocked the hell out of Harry. She had spoken to Sirius but it still surprised Harry.

"You stay here," ordered Sirius as he moved to the kitchen to get the phone. "I don't need you tracking mud through the house. Dobby would demand a raise."

Harry smirked. Dobby would do no such thing, but Harry didn't want to put more work on their house elves so he stood there in the hall. He heard a pop from the living room and poked his head inside.

Mr. Weasley's head sat in the flames of their fireplace.

"Ah, Hello, Harry," said Mr. Weasley. "I see you look as bad as Ron."

Harry grinned and shrugged. "It was just a little water fight," said Harry. "Ron started it."

"Yes, of course," said Ron's father. "And I'm sure you did your best to stop him."

Harry grinned at him. "Course I did."

"Harry, that was- Oh, hello Arthur," said Sirius as he entered the room

"Hi, Sirius," said Mr. Weasley. He glanced at Harry then turned back to Sirius. "Do you have a moment?"

"Yes," said Sirius and he looked at Harry. "That was Hermione on the phone. Go get dried off and changed. She would like a call back."

Harry nodded at Sirius. He recognized a dismissal when he saw it. "See you later Mr. Weasley."

“Bye, Harry.”

Harry went to his room and took a quick shower. Still toweling his hair, he came back down the stairs. Sirius was still in front of the fire.

“I told Arthur, Minister” Sirius said, sounding frustrated. “I don’t think he’s ready.”

“Sirius, he has to be ready,” said the face in the fire, which Harry didn’t recognize. “The world is waiting – demanding – this execution and it can’t happen until Harry talks to him.”

“Sirius?” said Harry, looking from the fire to his godfather.

“Oh, very good,” said the stranger in the fire. “Harry, my name is Stephen Goodhue. I am the new Minister of Magic.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Harry. “What’s going on?”

“Minister, I beg-“

“Harry,” said the Minister. “Did your guardian tell you about the Stay of Execution?”

“Yes,” said Harry. He looked at Sirius. “I have to see him.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Goodhue.

Harry looked back to the fire. “So, what’s the problem?” said Harry. “I’ll go whenever you want me too.”

“Excellent,” said the Minister with a broad grin.

“Harry,” said Sirius. “I don’t think you’re ready.”

“Sirius,” said Harry. “I’ve never been afraid to face Voldemort in my life. I won’t start now when he is locked up and about to be executed.”

And it was true. Why then was Harry's stomach starting to knot?

“All right, Harry.”

"All right Harry," said Sirius. "Have something to eat. I'll be back in a little bit."

"Where are you going?" said Harry, trying not to sound panicked.

"I'm just going to see Moony for a few minutes."

"Remus?" said Harry. "But-"

Sirius disappeared before Harry could finish his sentence.

Harry's stomach growled but he knew he wouldn't be able to eat.

"Sorry, Dobby," said Harry as he almost knocked over their House-Elf, who held a plate of food, on his way to the kitchen.

Picking up the receiver, Harry dialed Hermione's number and managed a pleasant conversation with Mrs. Granger as he waited for Hermione to pick up the phone.

She was breathless when she got on the line.

"Harry, are you all right?"

"Yes. What-"

"I've had phone calls from everyone in Gryffindor with a phone asking about you."

Which meant anyone Muggle born or half Muggle born.

"Herm-"

"What did he say?" said Hermione.

"What did who say?"

Hermione was silent for a moment. "Voldemort, of course."

"Voldemort?" said Harry.

"Yes, Harry," said Hermione sounding frustrated. "Remember him-"

"I haven't-"

"Wait a minute. You haven't seen him, yet?"

"No," said Harry. "They only asked me ten minutes ago. What's going on?"

"Harry, he scheduled to be executed the day after tomorrow. It's all over the papers," said Hermione. "Everyone's assumed you've already seen him."

"What?"

"You didn't know?"

"No," said Harry crossly. "You know no one ever tells me anything."

Except Voldemort.

Harry ignored it.

"I guess Sirius will be taking you tomorrow," said Hermione.

"I guess."

"It'll be all right, Harry. I know it," said Hermione a lot more confident than Harry felt. "He can't hurt you."

"I know," said Harry.

"All you have to do is talk to him," Hermione went on with what now sounded like a pep talk. "You've talked to him dozens of times."

"I know," said Harry.

"Harry," Sirius' voice called from the hall.

"I've got to go, Hermione," said Harry.

"I'll talk to you soon, Harry. Call me after you talk to him if you want to."

Harry said goodbye and hung up then he turned to his godfather as he came in.

"When were you going to tell me about the execution?" said Harry, crossing his arms.

"Doesn't matter," said Sirius with an expression of sternness and determination. "You are not going."

Harry sighed. He guessed Sirius was right. It didn't matter and Harry really didn't want to go anyway.

"Get some sleep," said Sirius. "We leave first thing in the morning."

Chapter 2

The Execution

Harry waited as the guards unlocked the gate before him.

"There aren't any Dementors in there, are there?" Harry whispered to Sirius.

"No, Harry," said Sirius. "Not in this section. Voldemort was their ally."

"So what do I do?" Harry's stomach was a knot of nerves but he wasn't about to admit it to anyone, least of all Sirius.

"Just go to his cell and talk to him," said Sirius. "He is the only one in this section. There are four guards by his cell, although he wants to talk to you alone but that is up to you."

"How long do I have to talk to him?" said Harry.

"That is up to you too," said Sirius.

Harry nodded as he and Sirius entered another corridor. Another gate was opened for them.

"Does he know I'm coming?" said Harry.

"No, Harry. He doesn't."

Harry stared at the last gate. Sirius wouldn't be coming through this gate with him. He could see the wizards down the hall, standing by one particular cell.

"Harry," said Sirius. "You don't have to do this."

Harry looked at the floor. "Yes, I do. You know I do." He turned to Sirius as the barred gate was closed between them.

"Don't get too close to the cell, Harry," said Sirius. "If he touches you..."

Sirius left the statement open and Harry nodded and turned. He walked silently down the hall. The guards didn't even acknowledge as he approached but they did back away. Harry kept to the wall on the other side of Voldemort's cell. Harry's head was already hurting.

When he glimpsed the cell, he was surprised. There was a comfy armchair inside facing the bars (with Voldemort reclined in it) and a desk strewn with parchment and ink and quills. Voldemort looked totally at ease. His eyes were closed.

Harry leaned against the wall across the hall from Voldemort's cell and crossed his arms. Voldemort didn't move. Harry had never seen Voldemort in such a state of relaxation. Was he meditating? Was he asleep?

"Is it meal time again?" said Voldemort without opening his eyes. "I tire of the mundane schedule you people keep."

Harry had to give him that. He didn't know it was Harry, but Voldemort knew someone was there. Harry put his hand to his scar.
Voldemort.

Harry had never seen Voldemort get up so fast.

Harry's eyes met his red gaze. "Did I sneak up on you, Voldemort?" said Harry.

Voldemort laughed with open delight. "Oh, Harry, how I have missed you." He moved to the bars. "So they have finally let you come to see me?"

"I'm here, aren't I," said Harry.

"I heard you were unconscious for three weeks."

"Fighting the strongest dark wizard of the century takes a lot out of a person," said Harry. "Even famous Harry Potter."

Voldemort chuckled. "Always the cynic, my Harry."

Harry straightened off the wall. "So what do you want?"

“Still cautious but curious, Harry?”

“Sort of, not stupid, remember,” said Harry.

“Hmm, yes, Harry, I remember,” said Voldemort. He looked at Harry in an inspecting way. “You’ve grown. Come here, so I can look at you properly.”

“I don’t think so,” said Harry. “And you can’t make me.”

Voldemort frowned. “No? Very well. You’ll have to wait until the execution to see.” He settled back into his large chair.

Harry shrugged. “I’m not going to the execution.”

Voldemort looked up. “But you must.”

Harry frowned at him. That one statement seemed just too insistent. “Why?”

“How will you know if I am dead if you do not come?” said Voldemort.

“Sirius didn’t want me to come today,” said Harry. “He won’t let me go to the execution.”

“Sirius won’t let you go see the wizard who killed your parents die?” said Voldemort with mock horror.

Harry smirked at him. “No,” he said, but Harry was curious at Voldemort’s expression.

“Well that complicates things,” said Voldemort.

Harry stared at him. “Why?”

Voldemort smiled. “Ah, that curiosity of yours.”

“I’m asking,” said Harry. “Why?”

“Come here and I will tell you,” said Voldemort.

Harry took a step toward the cell.

“NO, HARRY!” Sirius shouted from down the hall.

Harry’s eyes were on Voldemort.

“It’s the connection between us,” said Voldemort.

“What about it?” said Harry, taking another step.

“Harry, I’ve already taken measures to insure that I won’t die,” said Voldemort. “Yet there will be a wizard who *will* be strong enough to destroy me.”

Harry took another step toward the cell.

“Harry, stop!!!” shouted Sirius.

One more step and Harry would be in the flinch zone. “Me?” said Harry fearful, but knowing he was right.

“Yes, Harry.” Voldemort rose from his chair and stepped toward the bars between them. Harry flinched.

“Their executioner will not be able to kill me,” said Voldemort. “As soon as he tries, I will be free of my bonds and you will be the one who suffers.”

“Me?” said Harry, confused. He took the last step and rested a hand on the bars between them. “I don’t understand.”

“HARRY.”

Harry’s gaze was locked in Voldemort’s though. He didn’t hear Sirius.

“Our connection, Harry,” said Voldemort. “They will try to kill me but they can’t. Only *you* can kill me. Once *they* try, you will be the one that suffers. That is why you have to be there. They have to see you so they can stop it.”

“And you will get away?” said Harry.

“Yes, Harry.”

“Why are you telling me?”

Voldemort chuckled. “Oh, Harry, don’t you remember anything I have taught you?”

Harry glared at him. “Sirius and Dumbledore will believe me.”

“But you won’t tell them.”

Harry looked at the floor and reality hit him. “It doesn’t matter,” said Harry.

“Why,” quizzed Voldemort.

Harry looked up at him. “The Ministry is screaming for this execution. Nothing anyone says will stop them from trying to destroy you.”

“Very good, Harry,” said Voldemort. “I have taught you well. And you will come with me.”

Harry stared at him and slowly shook his head. “No, Voldemort. I won’t.”

Voldemort reached through the bars and grasped Harry’s chin. It had been a while since Harry felt the pain that accompanied Voldemort’s touch. He slowly sank to his knees.

“NO!” screamed Sirius. “Open he the gate, damn it!”

“Harry, I don’t give up easily,” said Voldemort. He studied Harry’s face closely. “Yes, my boy. Everything is working out exactly the way I planned it. I’m very pleased.”

There was nothing Harry could say. He heard Sirius’ foot steps pounding up the corridor and Voldemort let go of Harry’s face.

“Oh, relax, Sirius,” said Voldemort with a wave of his hand. “The boy is all right.”

Sirius ignored him and pulled Harry away from Voldemort’s cage.

“I’m OK,” said Harry.

“Make sure he comes to the execution, Sirius. *You* especially won't want him to miss it.”

Harry wove through people, careful not to touch them. Sirius had remained adamant that Harry stay home but Harry had a Firebolt and an Invisibility Cloak. He had to go. Sirius would probably ground Harry for life, but Harry had to see if Voldemort was telling the truth. Voldemort rarely lied to Harry. Harry had a feeling he wasn't lying now either.

Voldemort was tied to a – a stake – and he was searching the crowd with his gaze.

They were going to burn him? Harry was horrified. Not that it was Voldemort, just that they still did that.

Voldemort didn't look worried as he scanned the crowd assembled.

“Sirius, where is Harry?” shouted Voldemort.

“He's not coming, Voldemort.”

Voldemort didn't look happy. “So you will let him die alone?”

“What are you talking about?” said Sirius.

“As soon as they light this, I'll be free and Harry will burn for me,” said Voldemort. “Do you want Harry to burn?”

Sirius gasped, his jaw falling open. “I don't believe you,” said Sirius.

Harry inched closer. He had a clear view of the stake now. Voldemort was still looking around but now he looked concerned.

“Go and get him, Sirius,” said Voldemort. “He *has* to be here.”

Voldemort wanted Harry to be there. Was he afraid for Harry?

Harry touched his scar. *Voldemort.*

Harry saw Voldemort's head rise sharply and he searched the crowd again. He knew Harry was there.

Voldemort smiled. "He's here, Sirius," said Voldemort. "He listened to me. He knows I always tell him the truth."

The executioner approached the stake and read the charges, which were extensive. Then he addressed the crowd who became enthusiastic with death chants. He picked up the torch and the crowd went nuts.

Harry watched in horrified fascination. No one deserved this more than Voldemort but the crowd's blood lust was like nothing Harry had ever seen.

The executioner touched the torch to the kindling and the stake erupted in flames. Harry watched in a sort of numb state of dread. The larger pieces of wood caught and the flames grew hotter.

Heat converged on Harry. He started to sweat.

Voldemort looked around. The flames around him didn't seem to effect him. When his face disappeared through smoke and flames, Harry felt himself choking.

His lungs hurt and he coughed. The heat was unbearable. He threw off the cloak, falling to the ground. He couldn't breathe. His skin felt like he had the worst sunburn of his life. His hands were blistering.

I'm burning.

Harry screamed.

"STOP," Sirius yelled, turning to find Harry. "PUT IT OUT."

People were rushing around Harry, but all Harry could feel was his skin burning. He screamed again. He felt water being dumped on him. He screamed again.

A blanket was wrapped around him and someone was holding him tightly around the chest.

"Harry?"

Harry heard Sirius voice and let his head fall into his chest. "I'm sorry, Sirius."

Harry was shaking so badly. He couldn't feel Sirius' arms around him and wondered why.

Harry didn't want to move. Didn't want to think. Just wanted to lie there on Sirius' chest.

An explosion erupted and people started screaming. Harry tried to reach up an arm to clutch Sirius, but Sirius was pulled, wretched, ripped, away from Harry and Harry felt excruciating pain as another arm wrapped around his chest.

"The truth is so much more satisfying," said Voldemort. "Isn't it, Harry?"

Harry heard another explosion and more screaming.

"Focus on me, Harry," said Voldemort.

Chapter 3

Another Test

Voldemort released Harry somewhere near the campfire. Harry simply laid there, unable to move, his body trembling. Voldemort was still close to him. Harry could feel it as he listened to the activity around him. Several Death Eaters welcomed their master back but Harry noted no one sounded surprised to see him, or Harry for that matter.

Finally, Voldemort hailed someone and Harry felt several hands pulled him to his feet. He was taken, a bit roughly in Harry's opinion considering his injuries, to a tent. His burns were treated and not by someone with skill. Harry asked the witch where Snape was, but she wouldn't talk to him.

She merely did what she could for Harry and left.

When Harry was alone, he took stock of the situation. His arms, legs and hands seemed to be the worse off and they were now covered with a clear kind of goo. He pushed himself to his feet beside the bed. Although the pain from Voldemort's touch was fading, his skin still tingled and it was extremely painful to the touch.

Leave it to him to get burned at the stake. Why did this crap always happen to him? He looked down at his blistered hands.

Around his wrist he saw his tattered watch. The metal was black and the leather band fraying. Harry gingerly took it off and wiped the face with his shirttail. The time looked about right.

Harry tapped it. "Commentary."

Mr. Moony warned Mr. Padfoot that something like this would happen.

Mr. Padfoot would like to remind Mr. Moony that he was taking precautionary measures.

Mr. Wormtail knows the master will take care of everything.

Harry stared at the watch. "How about something that might actually be helpful," muttered Harry.

Mr. Prongs thinks that phoenix tears would help his son.

Call Rowan. Harry had to smile as he put the watch in his pocket so he wouldn't lose it. He looked to the door to call her and was hit with a spell that knocked him down. When he caught his breath, he found himself magically tied up.

Harry's cries of agony were muffled in the gag in his mouth as he was moved from his tent to the cage. Harry assumed by this gesture that he wasn't Voldemort's favorite pet anymore. He could deal with that, he guessed. He lay weakly on his side, his skin quivering again. Harry hoped that goo would start to work soon.

When Voldemort approached the cell, Harry pretended to be unconscious. He willed Voldemort not to touch him, which he didn't to Harry's great relief but he did linger, staring at Harry.

Harry felt all the binds except the one around his wrists disappear, but still maintained his feigned unconsciousness.

"I know you're awake," said Voldemort.

Harry said nothing.

"Aren't you curious to know why I have caged you?"

Harry said nothing.

"Harry, my pet," said Voldemort. "Talk to me."

Voldemort was trying to make him angry enough to talk now. Harry let it go by.

"Stubborn," said Voldemort with a sigh. "Very well."

Harry felt him leave and relaxed.

He woke up with start. He was bound and gagged again, this time he was blindfolded too. He felt Voldemort approach him from behind.

“Ah, there is the flinch,” said Voldemort. “Are you going to talk to me, now?”

Harry turned his head.

“Oh my,” said Voldemort and raised his hand. Again, all the binds fell off him except for the one around his wrists. Harry looked around then gingerly pushed himself to a sitting position and leaned wearily on the bars. “So would you like to know why you are in the cage?”

“I assumed it was because I’m not your favorite pet anymore,” said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. “No, Harry,” said Voldemort. “Would you like to come out?”

Harry watched as Voldemort idly toyed with the wand in his hand. As it was Harry’s wand, it drew his attention. “On what terms?” said Harry.

“On my terms.”

Harry could guess what those terms were. “Forget it, Voldemort.”

“Oh but I can’t forget it, Harry,” said Voldemort. He reached in and turned Harry’s chin, holding it so he could look in his face. “I can still recall the look on your face as you called me father.”

Harry felt like a knife had sunk into his chest. “I didn’t,” said Harry.

“You did, Harry.”

“No,” said Harry firmly. “I was repeating what Sirius said to me. That my father could do it.”

“Harry, you looked into my eyes and called me father,” said Voldemort.

“No,” said Harry. Voldemort let go of Harry’s face.

“Stubborn,” said Voldemort.

“Then let me go,” said Harry.

“Oh, no, Harry. I need you with me.”

“Why?”

“Because fear is a powerful motivation,” said Voldemort. “And having your power here with me strikes great fear into the wizarding world.”

“But you can’t use my powers,” said Harry. “I can’t control them.”

“Ah, smart boy. *That* I can teach you and that is what they fear.”

Why couldn’t he speak in plain English? “What-“

“We’ll talk again later, Harry.”

“Wait,” said Harry.

Voldemort turned back to him. “Something else?”

“Did I keep you there?” said Harry curiously.

“Yes, Harry.”

“Is that why I’m in here?”

“You’re confused,” said Voldemort. “You couldn’t physically hold me there, although you might be able to now. You held me there because you needed to accept my powers to get you over the threshold. I stayed for you, Harry, because you needed me. I had to wait until you accepted my help – me. When you called me father-“

“I didn’t,” insisted Harry.

“See. You won’t admit - accept – it,” said Voldemort. “And that is why you are in that cage.”

Voldemort approached the cage again sometime after dinner. He hadn’t even untied Harry’s hands to eat.

“When you stop being so stubborn, Harry,” said Voldemort. “You will be treated as you deserve.”

Harry sighed. "You wouldn't like the response off the top of my head so give me a minute."

Voldemort chuckled. "Stubborn," said Voldemort. "Very well. Good night, Harry."

Harry watched Voldemort walk towards his tent. When he left the perimeter of the glow from the fire, Harry looked around. It seemed like the entire compound had gone to sleep. He was actually going to leave Harry in the cage. Well, Harry guessed he could deal with that but he hadn't thought Voldemort *would*.

Harry looked down at his bound wrists. The goo had worked and the only indication that Harry had been burned was some swelling on his knuckles. The cage was flickering with a dim glow from the fire and shadows. Was the cage magically sealed too? Misery settled over him. He wanted to go home.

Then he remembered how easily Voldemort had broken out of Sirius magic ropes. Voldemort had said he might be strong enough to physically subdue Voldemort now. Maybe Harry was strong enough to break Voldemort's ropes.

He twisted his hands, muttering an 'undo' spell. Nothing happened other than the ropes dug into his wrists. There had to be a command – like apparating.

What a nightmare.

Nothing. *Come on, Harry.* He twisted his hands again. *I want to go home.*

The ropes burst open. Harry stared at his hands.

He quickly looked around. The compound was still quiet, no one around. He tried to apparate but couldn't. Moving to the door of the cage, he pulled out the knife Sirius had given him 2 years ago and started working on the lock.

What worked once, Harry tried again. *I want to go home.*

The lock clicked and the door swung open. Harry stared at it for a quick moment then pocketing the knife, jumped out.

“Very good, Harry.”

Harry spun around and his hand hit his scar as Voldemort quickly approached and grabbed Harry’s face.

“You are learning to control it,” said Voldemort. “I am pleased.”

“That was a test?” Harry managed to say. “Wasn’t it?”

“Of course,” said Voldemort. “All my tests teach you something, Harry. Hadn’t you realized that?”

Harry slowly sank to his knees. “You can’t keep me here now, Voldemort.”

Voldemort’s red eyes moved over Harry expression then stared into his eyes. “Soon, Harry,” said Voldemort.

“Let go of me,” whispered Harry.

“Oh, no, my boy,” said Voldemort. “I will not let go of you. You are mine. You have accepted our connection. You have accepted my power and my protection, which you now have again. You *will* accept my patrimony.”

“I won’t,” insisted Harry.

“I know, Harry. You’ve said that before but you are just being stubborn,” said Voldemort. “It’s only a matter of time.”

Voldemort let go and took two steps back. Harry looked up at him.

“I can’t keep you now, but, Harry, we still have a contract.”

How could Harry have forgotten about *that*? He dropped his head and nodded. He had gotten out of Voldemort’s binds and out of his cage only to be reminded of Voldemort’s contract.

Harry was getting sick of Voldemort’s tests.

“Can I go home, now, Voldemort?”

“Stubborn,” said Voldemort, not without impatience. “But yes, Harry. You may leave my exalted presence.”

Harry didn’t look up to see if Voldemort was smiling over that one. With a nightmarish thought, Harry apparated back to La Casa Black.

Chapter 4

Back to Hogwarts

Sirius admitted that he didn't think it would be as that simple to kill Voldemort. That he had figured Voldemort would probably try something at the execution, which is why he hadn't wanted Harry to be there.

"If I hadn't gone," said Harry. "Do you think I still would have burned?"

"Yes, Harry," said Sirius. "I believe you would have which is why you aren't in trouble for not doing as your told."

"He told me it would happen, Sirius," said Harry. "I didn't know what else to do."

"I know, Harry," said Sirius. "But you have to learn to come to me when you have problems."

"I know," said Harry quietly. Great, more guilt. "I'm sorry."

"And stop apologizing all the time. Half the things that happen to you aren't because of what you do," said Sirius. "Most of it is because your name happens to be Harry Potter."

Harry smirked at his godfather. "So when are we moving to Bulgaria?"

Sirius laughed softly as he closed the front door. They were heading to Diagon Alley for Harry's school supplies.

They met up with Ron and Hermione. Mrs. Weasley hugged the stuffing out of Harry.

"All right, Harry?" said Mr. Weasley.

Sirius gave Harry some money and sent the three of them off to Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor so he could talk to the Weasley's. "My treat," said Sirius.

Harry filled Ron and Hermione in on what happened after Voldemort stole him from the execution, editing out that Voldemort was trying to get Harry accept him as a father figure. They already knew some of Voldemort's plan from last year but Harry didn't feel like talking about it.

"So that bloody contract is still in effect," muttered Ron.

"Unfortunately," said Harry.

"Too bad that wretched man didn't go up in smoke," said Hermione.

"I almost went up in smoke," said Harry.

"We have to figure out a way around that now, too," said Hermione.

"Yeah," said Ron. He looked at Hermione. "Are you going to tell him or what?"

"Tell me what," said Harry.

"Well it seems so mundane after everything else," said Hermione.

"Tell me," said Harry.

"Hermione make prefect," said Ron.

"That's great." Harry hugged her. "I need to hear little stuff like that, Hermione," said Harry.

"I guess," said Hermione. "I'm surprised you didn't make it, Harry. Your grades soared last year."

"Me?" said Harry aghast. "Voldemort's favorite pet? - Prefect? Scary."

Ron laughed.

The Hogwarts Express rumbled toward school and Harry, Ron and Hermione sat alone in a compartment. Crookshanks was coiled, sleeping in a spare seat. Harry was almost dozing himself. Rowan sat on his lap with her head on his chest. Hedwig and Pig were also asleep in their cages.

Hermione was reading. Ron was building a house of Exploding Snap cards. Harry was half watching, waiting for it to blow up.

Harry's hand hit his forehead as pain exploded in it. Ron and Hermione jumped.

"What is it, Harry?" said Ron. "A signal?"

The pain lessened to a dull burn. "I'm not sure," said Harry.

When the large snake slithered into the compartment, Ron and Hermione jumped again. Hermione jumped onto her seat. Crookshanks started hissing and Hermione grabbed him.

"It's all right," said Harry. "That's Nagini, Voldemort's snake."

"What's it doing here?" cried Hermione.

Harry turned to the snake. *"Where is he, Nagini? What does he want?"*

"Harry, you are a parselmouth?" said Voldemort.

Harry looked up at him in the doorway of the compartment. Voldemort's expression was – well more surprised than Harry had ever seen him. With everything else Voldemort knew, he wondered how that piece of knowledge had escaped notice. He touched his scar. "This isn't the only thing you gave me the day we met," said Harry.

Voldemort blinked then laughed. "How wonderful. Why didn't you tell me?"

"It never came up," said Harry. "So why are you here?" He turned to Nagini. *"Has he decided to let you eat me now?"*

Voldemort laughed again.

"No, Harry Potter," said Nagini. *"The master won't let me eat you."*

"You should've eaten Wormtail when you had the chance," said Harry.

“How did you know about that?” said Voldemort.

Harry looked up and stared at him.

“Come now, Harry,” said Voldemort. “I satisfy your curiosity, satisfy mine.”

“I had a dream, all right.”

“Tell me,” urged Voldemort.

Harry glanced at Ron, who shrugged, then at Hermione who was still standing on her seat, clutching Crookshanks. He ran a hand through his hair.

“You were torturing Wormtail and you got an owl. You said that Wormtail’s mistake had been corrected – that someone was dead (which I assume now was Crouch) then you told Nagini that she wasn’t going to get to eat Wormtail but there was still me.”

Voldemort chuckled.

Ron perked up. “Is that the dream you had in Divination that day?”

“Yeah,” said Harry.

Ron laughed. “Good thing you didn’t tell Trelawney,” said Ron. “She would have went nuts with it.”

“I know,” said Harry. He turned to Voldemort. “So did you want something?”

Voldemort reached into his robe and pulled out Harry’s wand. Harry took it from him and pocketed it.

“Why are you harassing Harry again?” they heard from out in the corridor.

Three male voices rose, “Shut up, Ginny.” Ron, and Fred and George (who were obviously out in the hall with her) sounded exasperated.

Harry reached around Voldemort and pulled her inside the compartment so fast she almost tripped over the snake.

Ginny gasped at it when she realized what it was but Harry pulled her behind himself. "Ginny, it's all right. Just be quiet."

Voldemort surveyed the scene with interest. "Ron's sister, is she?" said Voldemort.

"And ours," said Fred from behind him.

"Interesting," said Voldemort.

Nagini circled around Voldemort and wrapped herself around him. "*Master, since I can't eat Master Harry, can I eat the cat?*" said Nagini.

Still with an arm blocking Ginny, Harry shouted at snake, "*No!*" To Hermione, "Hold onto Crookshanks."

"*Pity,*" said Nagini and she eyed the birds littering the compartment.

"*Don't even think about it,*" said Harry. He looked up at Voldemort. "Could you take your pet and leave now."

Voldemort looked at Nagini. "*Interesting,*" said Voldemort to his snake. "*Do you think he means you or himself?*"

Ron couldn't have understood but must have seen Harry expression redden with the rage he was feeling because he reached out and grabbed Harry's arm. Ginny did too.

Voldemort chuckled. "*Oh, I like that, Harry. Indeed I do. We have another way to communicate. The bond grows ever stronger.*" He glanced around at all the puzzled faces (he had been speaking in parseltongue) then turned to stare pointedly at Harry. "Don't forget our contract, Harry," said Voldemort.

Voldemort and Nagini disappeared and Harry fell into his seat running both hands over his face and through his hair.

"Great," said Harry. "Now he can harass me in another language."

“But you can too,” said Hermione, climbing down from her seat with Crookshanks still in her arms.

Harry looked up at her. She didn’t look very resolute herself. “Why doesn’t that make me feel any better?” said Harry.

“I hate that man,” Ginny grumbled.

The first week of school was relatively dull with the exception of their first Divination class. Professor Trelawney actually predicted Harry was going to get eaten by a snake.

Harry thought Ron was going to fall off his chair, he was laughing so hard. Harry laughed too but brought himself up as Trelawney drew next to his chair.

“Problem, my dear?” said Trelawney

“I’m sorry, Professor,” said Harry, forcing seriousness to his face. “It’s just that that is one of your more brilliant predictions.”

Harry had sparked her interest.

“Is it, Mr. Potter,” said Trelawney. “Why?”

Harry ran a hand through his hair and looked up at her. Those huge eyes of hers looked back through her glasses. “Well, because I do happen to know a snake that would very much like to eat me,” said Harry.

Harry heard Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil gasp in awe.

“How do you know this?” said Professor Trelawney.

“She told me,” said Harry.

“She told you?” echoed Trelawney, looking suspicious.

Harry nodded. “The whole school knows I’m a Parselmouth, Professor. Surely, *you* knew.”

“Of course, of course,” said Trelawney. “But I find it odd that a snake would actually *tell* you.”

“Actually,” said Harry. “It was sort of second hand.”

“Was it?” said Trelawney.

“Oh, go on,” said Ron. “Tell her.”

Harry glanced around the classroom. Everyone was looking on with interest. Not with contempt or fear, merely interest.

“Remember two years ago when I fell asleep in class,” said Harry.

The class murmured. Harry guessed they remembered it.

Trelawney nodded. “You woke up screaming, clutching your scar,” she said.

Harry was afraid to look at the class now but Ron nodded at him.

“Yes well the dream was of Voldemort (Harry heard several gasps at the name) torturing his servant, which you predicted would go to him that night and promising Nagini – Voldemort’s snake – that he could eat me instead of his servant.”

Several students gasped. Trelawney looked aghast.

“So you see,” said Harry. “You predicted the whole thing, Professor. Even though I managed to escape Voldemort in the graveyard after the Triwizard Tournament, I happen to know that Nagini still wants to eat me.”

The class started muttering excitedly about Trelawney predictions (which Harry felt was probably for his sake) and Trelawney was almost blushing with pride.

She beamed at Harry. “Well, my dear,” said Trelawney. “I hope you will take the Inner Eye more seriously now.”

“Oh, indeed, I will,” said Harry, forcing a straight and serious face. “I’ll be paying very close attention to what happens in this class.”

Trelawney nodded her approval and dismissed the class.

Outside the trapdoor, Harry had his back slapped a number of times. Most of the class thought Harry had double talked himself out of detention but Ron, who knew everything was true, was still laughing.

“Are you going to tell You-Know- - I mean, Voldemort?” said Ron.

Harry sent him a glance. “Probably not,” said Harry. “It would amuse him as much as it did you.”

“Then maybe, he’ll break a blood vessel and bleed to death,” said Ron, quite seriously.

Harry looked at him and couldn’t help laughing. “Good point,” said Harry. “Maybe I *will* tell him.”

Harry did end up writing it in his required weekly letter to Voldemort. There was so little else to mention so soon in the school year.

Voldemort’s reply was simple.

Harry, I’m not going to let Nagini eat you. Although, she is very interested in Hermione’s cat.

Harry’s classes started to get boring very quickly. He wondered if it had anything to do with that ‘extra boost’ of power that Voldemort had given him the end of last year but didn’t want to come right out and ask anyone. Not that they would tell him anyway.

To occupy his time, he started working on new strategies for the Quidditch team. Ron was all too happy to assist (which annoyed Hermione. “Harry, not all of us can breeze through classes. Ron has to study.”). Ron, who Harry suspected just didn’t want to piss off Hermione because he liked her, agree. He helped Harry in secret anyway.

Harry waved to the students, who were flying around the Quidditch pitch, indicating that they were finished. He stood on the ground with the rest of the existing team contemplating the try-outs they had just held.

His team thrust the parchments with their tallies on them at Harry then promptly deserted him.

“Good luck, Harry,” said Colin Creevy, their Keeper since last year.

Harry watched him leave then sat down on the bench next to the pitch to go through everyone’s notes. They needed two beaters (alas Fred and George were gone) and two chasers (Angelina had been replaced last year and now the other girls were gone as well). Harry sighed. He was the last player left from the team everyone considered “the Best Quidditch team Hogwarts has ever seen.”

Harry would just have to make a new one. He had all four of the needed positions picked out in his head from watching them but the rest of the team had to agree. As Captain, Harry had final say but he wanted it to be unanimous and, of course, McGonagall could veto any choice they made if the student wasn’t academically pulling his or her weight.

Shuffling through the votes, Harry had to smile. Two of his choices were unanimous. Two Weasleys out, two Weasleys in.

Ginny had tried out last year but hadn’t been quite as good a Chaser as Morgan who had replaced Angelina, but this year, Ginny was exceptional. Harry could have almost called his feelings proud as he’d watched her fly earlier.

And Ron. Ron had finally admitted that the reason he had never tried out was because the only position he felt he was good enough at was Beater. Ron knew that no one would ever think of replacing Fred and George, who as twins moved as one unit, no matter how good.

Harry could’ve argued, having played countless games with the Weasleys, that Ron was a damn good Keeper but since Colin was almost as good as Oliver, he didn’t see the point. Especially now since Ron had made the team anyway – in the position he wanted.

Harry looked at the other names. Colin had voted for his little brother Dennis for the other Chaser. Dennis had good enough aim, Harry considered, but he couldn’t catch to save his life and he was still on the excitable side.

Morgan had selected a 4th year named Maris Kelley for the Chaser, who Harry favored also. Morgan had suggested Dennis or little August Fry for the other Beater. Harry had originally thought August, a 2nd year wizard, was too young but Morgan had a good eye for players (not to mention that Harry remembered at this point that he was only a 1st year when he started himself) so he decided to have a call-back for the Beater position. Even if Harry was leaning toward Dennis for the position. It was Harry's opinion that if they channeled Dennis' good aim and excitability and put a club in his hand, he'd be fairly lethal with a Bludger.

"How many are you down?"

Harry almost cringed. He had hoped to go at least another week of school without hearing that irritating drawl. A glance up showed Malfoy before him in his green Quidditch uniform, his broom lightly grasped in his hand. He guessed the Slytherins were holding their try-outs next.

Malfoy's expression was bland and his tone had been neutral.

"Four," said Harry. "You?"

"Three," said Malfoy, taking a step closer. Harry suspected he was looking at Harry's notes.

Then Harry noticed the Captain's insignia on Malfoy's uniform. Harry almost asked Malfoy if he came to gloat until he realized the implications. No more Marcus Flint? There was a god.

Harry fixed his eyes on the insignia. "Don't tell me Flint actually graduated?" said Harry trying to sound more incredulous than relieved.

Malfoy smirked at him. "Don't get your hopes up, Potter," said Malfoy. "He's being forced to repeat 7th year. So naturally he's been removed as Captain."

"They're still letting him play?" Now Harry was incredulous. He should have been kicked off the team. But then there was no justice when it came to Slytherins.

Malfoy went on. "And of course I was the obvious choice to replace him."

"Obviously," muttered Harry, moving his attention back to his notes and hoping Malfoy would get the hint and go away.

No such luck.

"And apparently my selection for replacements is far better than yours."

Harry glanced up and noticed that Malfoy's interest was on his notes now.

"Honestly," said Malfoy with dramatic sympathy. "Wizarding trash and Mudbloods. What will you do?"

Harry looked down at his notes, defying his rising anger. "You know, Malfoy," said Harry forcing a bored tone, "Your bigotry and your snobbery is getting old, not to mention lame."

"Sue me."

"Did you want something?"

"Actually," said Malfoy. "I wanted to know what it was like being burned at the stake."

Harry kept his eyes on his papers although they had blurred. How he kept from exploding was a mystery.'

"It was only slightly less painful then having my back shredded," said Harry.

Harry congratulated himself on his detached tone. He had rendered Malfoy speechless. Too bad it was temporary.

"You know my father was punished for that," said Malfoy quietly.

"Do I?"

"Don't you?" challenged Malfoy.

Harry shrugged but wasn't about to admit to anything. "Sorry, Malfoy, but I'm not privy to all of Voldemort's dealings with his Death Eaters."

"Aren't you?" dared Malfoy again.

Harry looked up now, seriously fighting with his temper.

"All you have to do is ask," said Malfoy.

That was too much, especially coming from Draco Malfoy. Harry stood up.

"Look, Malfoy," said Harry, trying not to raise his voice. "I'm obligated to deal with *him*. I don't have to deal with you so stay the hell away from me."

"Draco, come on!"

Malfoy looked up over the pitch.

"I'll be right there," he called back.

"Oh, please – go," said Harry. "Don't let me keep you."

Malfoy turned back to Harry, his eyes narrowed. "You don't get it, do you, Potter?" said Malfoy with a combination of frustration and aggravation.

"If you've got something to say to me, Malfoy, then spit it out."

"Know your enemy," said Malfoy.

"What are you talking about?"

"You really are pathetic, aren't you, Potter," said Malfoy. "I should hex you on that principle alone."

Malfoy's tone was more wearied than anything else but Harry took it as a serious threat. He pulled out his wand, aiming it dangerously.

"Give me a reason, Malfoy," said Harry. "I'll curse you into next week and you know I can."

Malfoy nodded. "Oh, I know what you can do," said Malfoy. "In fact, a lot of people know just what you can do. Do you?"

"Malfoy-

"And how well do you know what your enemy can do?"

Harry slowly lowered his wand. "Are you trying to give me advice, Malfoy?" said Harry, suddenly suspicious.

Malfoy's eyes darted around and the sneer came back to his expression. "Me? Advise you?" Malfoy scoffed. "Not even if you begged."

Harry was ready to rip out his hair or curse Malfoy anyway. Just what was-

"Problem, gentlemen?"

Great. Snape.

"No, Professor," said Malfoy. "Potter and I were just discussing the Quidditch try-outs."

"I see," said Snape, looking back and forth between them.

Malfoy mounted his broom and glanced back at Harry. "No need to wish you luck, Potter," said Malfoy, with that smug, conceited grin. He gestured at Harry's notes. "Looks like the cup is ours this years."

Harry let Malfoy have that parting shot. Summoning his Firebolt, he left the field. Snape said nothing.

He shoved the entire conversation out of his mind, chalking it up as just another one of those bizarre verbal skirmishes that he's always had with Malfoy. Malfoy didn't know what he was talking about anyway.

The days stretched into weeks. Gryffindor won its first Quidditch match against Hufflepuff thanks to a spectacular save by Ron, who had saved Harry from a Bludger just before Harry had caught the

Snitch. Harry had never seen Ron get so much attention. The rest of the team just sat back and watched Ron eat up the praise.

“Oh, let him have his fun,” Ginny said as she pulled Harry into a seat next to her.

Harry clanked his bottle of butterbeer to hers. “Better him than me,” Harry muttered.

“Stop being such a cynic,” said Ginny, brushing something off his shoulder.

Harry still hadn’t figured out if it was his clothes or just him, but Ginny always found something wrong with his appearance. She was constantly picking lint or hair off his robes or straightening his tie or pushing back his hair. Not that Harry minded the fussing, it just seemed that since Percy’s wedding, Ginny considered it her personal responsibility to ‘fix’ Harry.

“Does it bother you?” Hermione had asked.

“Well, no,” said Harry.

“Then stop complaining.”

So Harry did. In fact, he had very little to complain about. Things were very quiet. Too quiet. There seemed to be very little activity outside the school as well.

Sirius wrote to him frequently. Still considered a target, Sirius’ activities were more or less confined. He had confided to Harry that he had asked Dumbledore if he could come back to the school and teach again but had been denied. So instead he had resigned himself to work on his bike. Sirius had identified twelve ‘unidentified’ aspects of the controls and was working on discerning their functions. He promised Harry to keep him posted.

Voldemort’s notes were brief and consisted mostly of his approval of Harry’s grades.

It was almost as if the war had ceased. Or as if both sides were waiting for the other to make the next move.

Harry didn't even want to guess what the next move would be. He had an intuitive feeling that whatever it was, it was going to involve himself.

Soon after Halloween, Harry was proven right.

Chapter 5

The Celebration

Professor McGonagall called him after Transfiguration class.

“Yes, Ma’am?” said Harry cautiously. Every time she’d done this in the past, it had caused Harry weeks of hardship.

“Sit down, Harry,” said McGonagall.

Harry? Now Harry was scared. McGonagall never called him Harry.

Harry sat down.

“I’ve noticed your Transfiguration skills have grown considerably.”

Harry dropped his gaze. “I’m sorry,” he said automatically.

Silence settled between them. Harry could have screamed. He dared a glance up at Professor McGonagall and saw her looking back with a look of – pity.

Harry wouldn’t take that. It wasn’t his fault that Voldemort kept giving him power.

Harry stood up. “There nothing I can do about it, Professor. I’ll go now.”

“Sit down, Potter!” said McGonagall.

Harry sat down. He still didn’t look her in the eye. *What have I done now? What’s happened?*

“I was wondering,” said McGonagall. “Well considering your father and your godfather.”

Harry looked up, totally baffled now.

“I wondered if you gave any consideration to becoming an Animangus.”

Harry stood up. "What?" He stared at her. "Me?"

"Yes, you, Potter," said McGonagall. "You have the talent and the blood."

"You think I can do that?" said Harry aghast.

He stared at her and once again her expression changed to one of cool sympathy. As if she expected him to react the way he had.

"Yes, Potter. I think you can," said McGonagall. "It would mean private lessons with me but I don't think it would take as long as it took your father or Sirius, who did it in secret. You already have quite a bit more magical talent than Sirius."

"Professor," said Harry, slowly sitting back down. "This is such a wonderful offer. I don't know what to say."

McGonagall smiled at him. "Say yes, Potter," said McGonagall. "And start thinking of an animal."

"Yes!" Harry practically shouted. McGonagall looked pleased. Then Harry frowned. Animal? "What do you think?" he asked her.

"For an animal?" said McGonagall. Harry nodded and she studied him. "Well, small animals are easy enough but for you, especially with your love of flying, I'd go with a bird."

"A bird," echoed Harry with awe, his mind racing with excitement.

"Yes," said McGonagall. "In your case, with your build and your talent," she paused to study him. "You could probably master a falcon, a hawk or an eagle."

Harry blinked at her.

"Think about it, Potter," said McGonagall. "Run along now."

Harry raced out of the classroom nearly bursting with excitement. McGonagall had asked him. She had brought it up. Harry had never

even thought about it. A bird. How great would that be? Probably better than racing around on his Firebolt.

He couldn't wait to tell Ron and Hermione. What would Sirius say? Voldemort would be so pleas-

Harry stopped dead. *I didn't just think that! I didn't.*

But he had. And Harry knew that it would indeed please Voldemort. But Harry wasn't trying to please him, was he?

NO!!!!

Work hard and you will be rewarded.

You have accepted my powers. You will accept my patrimony.

"I won't," Harry told himself as he continued toward the dungeons.

The master's favorite pet.

Somehow Harry preferred that angle to the roll Voldemort was trying to manipulate Harry into presently.

Maybe that was a defense Harry could use. Go back to being the favorite pet. Harry could do that. At least he could try.

"You're late, Potter."

Harry looked up at Snape as he entered the potions dungeon.

"Sorry, Professor," said Harry. "Professor McGonagall needed to speak to me."

"I can find out if you're lying, you know," said Snape.

"Why would I lie when-" Harry cut himself off. *Stop it, Harry!* He chastised himself. "I know, Sir," said Harry.

Harry sat down next to Ron. Ron sent him an interested glance.

"How's it feel to be burned at the stake, Harry?"

Harry looked over to the Slytherin side of the dungeon. Pansy had thrown out the question. No one but Malfoy had said a word about the execution yet. Harry glanced at Malfoy who was staring at Pansy with disbelief. What? It was ok for Malfoy to ask, but no one else should dare? Harry almost laughed.

Hermione leapt to her feet. "How's it feel to be a total-"

"Miss Granger," warned Snape.

Harry looked at Pansy with a blank expression. "It was hot," said Harry flatly.

Pansy looked stricken and turned red.

Snape gave them their assignment.

Harry wasn't even sure what potion he and Ron were working on. His thoughts redirected again toward Voldemort. Damned Slytherins. Maybe it was more of Voldemort's manipulation. Maybe Voldemort had decided to use his Slytherin minions to constantly keep Harry thinking about him.

But McGonagall wasn't Slytherin and she certainly didn't want to please-

Whatever Harry dropped into his cauldron was *not* supposed to be added.

Harry pulled his hand away as his cauldron exploded and both he and Ron ducked as it sent sparks up into the air.

Snape came over to glare down at Harry. Harry hid his right hand in his left. When he had dropped whatever it was into the cauldron and the potion had erupted, it had burned Harry's palm.

"I'm sorry, Professor," said Harry, biting his lip.

"Detention, Potter," said Snape. He reached out and grabbed Harry's robe, dragging him outside the dungeon.

Great, thought Harry.

Once in the hall, Snape took hold of Harry's right wrist and held it up exposing Harry's burnt hand.
"How-"

"I've seen that happen before, Harry," said Snape. "But usually the student is screaming in pain."

Harry looked at his hand, still in Snape's grip. It did look like a rather nasty burn but he shrugged. "Doesn't hurt *that* much," said Harry.

Snape stared at him and let go of his wrist. "Hospital wing, Potter," said Snape.

Harry nodded but then pain erupted in Harry's scar. Harry's hand – the injured one - hit his scar and pain erupted in his palm too.

"Great," muttered Harry, shaking his hand out.

"Give me your hand," said Snape.

Harry held out his hand and Snape bandaged it with his wand.

Voldemort signaled again.

"Go, Harry," said Snape.

Harry nodded. *The nightmare!*

Voldemort was in his chair by the fire so Harry had to step back.

"Ah, Harry." Voldemort paused when he saw Harry's bandaged hand pressed to his forehead. "What happened?"

Harry was going to blame Voldemort's signal but decided against it. Voldemort could always tell when Harry was lying.

"I threw the wrong ingredient into my potion and it exploded," said Harry.

“Harry,” said Voldemort, “you weren’t paying attention in Severus’ class? I’m disappointed.”

Harry put his plan into effect immediately. Time to see if he was any good as his own brand of manipulation. He stepped back and dropped his gaze. “But I got some news that would please you. I was too excited to think.”

Voldemort stood up. “Oh? Tell me.”

Harry told him what Professor McGonagall had said as Voldemort paced across the fire from Harry.

“It does please me, Harry,” said Voldemort. “Is this why you’ve not written me this week? Because you wanted to tell me yourself?”

Harry jumped on the excuse. He had, in fact, forgotten to write. “Yes,” said Harry.

“That pleases me too, my pet,” said Voldemort.

Yes! Good! He used that word. Harry lowered his gaze to the ground again.

“And what does Sirius have to say?”

“I just found out,” said Harry. “I-I haven’t told Sirius yet.”

Voldemort stopped pacing and turned to Harry. Harry didn’t look up but could feel those eyes on him.

“You are the only one I’ve told so far,” said Harry, which was the truth because he hadn’t gotten to Ron and Hermione yet.

Voldemort laughed.

Harry cast a glance at him. *This could work.* “I have pleased you.” Harry swallowed. “Master.”

“Oh, yes,” said Voldemort. “Yes, ind-“ Voldemort cut himself off and looked back at Harry. “Harry?”

“Yes?”

“Look at me,” said Voldemort.

Harry glanced up at him.

“What are you doing, Harry?” said Voldemort.

“Master,” said Lucius Malfoy, stepping up to them.

“What is it, Lucius?” said Voldemort, his eyes still on Harry, who was still looking at the ground.

Harry took two steps away.

“Where are you going, Harry?” snapped Voldemort.

“I was just giving you and Mr. Malfoy privacy,” said Harry.

“Did I ask you too?” snapped Voldemort again.

He was getting annoyed. Harry didn’t care. “No, master” said Harry. “I’m sorry.” Harry stepped back to where he had been standing, eyes still on the ground.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Lucius Malfoy’s incredulous look, then Lucius smiled with great smug satisfaction.

“So, you’ve tamed your pet, My Lord,” said Malfoy.

Harry could have hugged Malfoy. Harry had done it. He was back to pet status.

Voldemort’s hand came around Harry’s chin so fast, Harry gasped and hit his knees.

“That’s what you’re doing, isn’t it, Harry?” said Voldemort, searching Harry’s eyes. “You refuse to accept what I offer you so you’re using *that* to harden yourself against me.”

“If you say so,” said Harry.

Voldemort studied him. "Oh, but I do say so." He released Harry's face. "Get up, Harry."

Harry pushed to his feet, still looking at the ground.

"Look at me," demanded Voldemort.

Harry wiped all expression off his face and looked up at Voldemort.

Voldemort's expression was livid.

"I have displeased you," said Harry. He dropped his gaze again. "I'm sorry." Harry hoped it came out as dispassionately as he intended.

"You're sorry," said Voldemort. "Should I punish you, Harry?"

Harry shrugged. "If it pleases you."

Voldemort grabbed Harry's face again, putting him to his knees. Harry had never seen Voldemort quite so angry. Harry didn't care. This was just what he needed – a reminder of who Voldemort was.

Voldemort let go of Harry's face. "Lucius, lash him."

"Master?" said Lucius hesitantly.

Voldemort stared at Harry. "I said lash him. NOW. I will hold him if I have too."

But Harry vowed Voldemort wouldn't have to. Harry was ready. This would remind Harry of all Voldemort's manipulations. He balled his fists and closed his eyes tightly as the lash hit across his back again and again.

"Harry, look at me!" demanded Voldemort.

Harry looked up. Voldemort had lowered to one knee in front of Harry and was studying him closely. Harry flinched with each flick of Lucius' wand but tried to keep that dead passionless feeling on his expression. Harry couldn't tell what Voldemort was looking for but when Harry thought he was at the end of his endurance, Voldemort told Lucius to stop.

Harry reached out and grabbed Voldemort's arm. He squeezed his eyes shut for a minute against the pain of his back and the pain of touching Voldemort then looked up into those red slits. Voldemort looked down at Harry's hands, clutching his arm then met his gaze again.

Harry let go of the feelings he had been concealing. "I have accepted your protection," said Harry. "I have accepted our connection. I have accepted your power and I accept your punishment."

Voldemort looked staggered.

"I will not accept your patrimony." Harry swallowed hard. "I don't know first hand, but I'm pretty sure *that* isn't included in the job description."

Now Voldemort looked horrified.

Harry let go of him and fell to the ground.

"Call Rowan, Harry," said Voldemort. "Call her." He sounded desperate.

How Harry would have loved to say, 'Are you begging?' but Harry feigned unconsciousness.

"What have I done?" whispered Voldemort.

Harry's entire body was screaming in pain but Harry felt like smiling. Harry had won that round.

Harry woke up to a stab of pain on his back. He was laid out on his stomach on his bed in his tent, his head cradled on his arms.

After a gasp of pain, he heard Snape's voice.

"So, what did you do this time?"

"Don't sound so smug, Professor," said Harry. "I did what I was told."

"Really?" said Snape doubtfully.

“Ouch,” said Harry. It felt as if Snape’s wand was burning his skin back together.

“Call your phoenix, Harry,” said Snape. “Some of these are deep.”

“No,” said Harry.

“Why not? She could heal you in seconds and I’m not that skilled at this particular sort of healing,” said Snape. “As the scars on your back from the last time can attest.”

“Scars I can deal with,” said Harry. “Just do what you can.”

“Stubborn.”

“Professor,” said Harry. “I was perfectly respectful. I did everything he told me to do. I even called him master and he punished me.” Harry sighed. “I intend to remember it.”

Harry gasped again as Snape’s wand moved to another slash on his back.

“Do you think he got my point?” said Harry.

“Oh I think he did,” said Snape. “If not, he does now.”

“Why?” said Harry. “Is he here?”

“You can’t feel him?”

Harry picked up his head and turned it to rest his head on the other side and saw Voldemort sitting in a chair across the room. He was staring at Harry with a look of – well regret. Harry almost laughed but Snape had moved his wand again.

Harry flinched and closed his eyes.

“Call Rowan, Harry,” said Voldemort.

“No,” said Harry.

“Stubborn.”

Harry opened his eyes and looked at Voldemort. "You've punished me before, seen me in greater pain than this. Deal with it."

"But you forced me to do that to you," said Voldemort.

"Did I?" said Harry vaguely.

"You know you did," said Voldemort.

"I guess you taught me manipulation quite well then too," said Harry.

"I'm not amused, Harry," said Voldemort.

"Am I laughing?" said Harry.

Harry flinched again and closed his eyes, this time back into unconsciousness.

He woke to Voldemort's voice.

"You didn't do a very good job, Severus," said Voldemort.

"I told you to take him to Hogwarts," said Snape. "Madame Pomfrey—"

"You know I want him here presently," said Voldemort. "And I wanted to hear his explanation."

"And you've heard it," said Snape. "I know you don't like it."

"No, I do not," said Voldemort. Harry felt him move into the flinch zone.

"Then adjust his memory."

"Oh, no, Severus," said Voldemort. "Harry is fighting, which is his right and is admirable. But he will accept me."

"You are obsessing, Master," said Snape.

"I'm determined, Severus," said Voldemort. "James Potter fought me as well but there is as much of *me* in this boy as there is of his

parents. I gave him all of it – some by accident, some by choice. My plans have not altered because of his stubbornness.”

“So what will you do?”

“The first part has been initiated,” said Voldemort. “The second is up to him.”

Harry felt the pain increase as if Voldemort was reaching toward his face.

“I had to kill James,” said Voldemort softly. “I can not kill his son but I will have him. He pleases me very much. Everything is going according to my design. Harry *will* call me father and mean it.”

Harry screamed as he felt Voldemort’s knuckles on his cheek. Recoiling, Harry fell off the bed onto his back. He screamed again and rolled to his side, breathing hard.

“Call Rowan, Harry,” said Voldemort.

Harry said nothing, puzzling over what he’d heard. He pulled himself to his feet and picked up his shirt, which was shredded. He repaired it with a spell on the way to the bathroom where he struggled into it. What was Voldemort’s plan now? Harry wished he could keep up.

He splashed his face with cold water. When he returned to the bedroom, Snape and Voldemort were still there.

“So are you finished with me?” Harry asked Voldemort.

Voldemort stared into Harry’s face. “No, Harry. I am not.” Voldemort turned and moved towards the door.

“But-“

“Harry,” said Voldemort, turning back. “I called you and you came to me as our contract states you must and you know you can not leave me until I say you may leave. And it pleases me that you will stay with me for the weekend.”

"But-" said Harry, again.

"And I know how you wish to please me."

Voldemort smiled a sort of odd smile and left.

"What's he up to now," said Harry aloud.

"I don't know," said Snape. "But be on your guard. I've seen that smile before and I usually don't like what happens after it."

Great.

Harry left his tent at dinner time after 2 painful hours of boredom. He couldn't sit and lean back, so he tried to nap but couldn't. He tried a hot bath but that didn't help much. He even considered calling Rowan but didn't want to give Voldemort the satisfaction.

"You *are* stubborn, Harry," he told himself.

One glance around the camp showed massive activity, as if the Death Eaters were gearing up for something.

"What's going on?" Harry asked Snape when he had located him.

"Oh this is just a little celebration," said Snape.

"Why?"

"I'm forbidden to tell you, Harry," said Snape. "I'm sorry. You'll have to ask Voldemort."

Which Harry would *not* do. Harry got himself a plate of food and went to the fire. He sat down on the edge of his chair, picking at his food.

A robed figure stopped before him and Harry looked up. The woman looked ghostly pale and skeletally thin. Harry put down his plate and stood up.

"Can I help you?" said Harry.

"Harry Potter?" inquired the woman.

“Um, yes,” said Harry curiously.

Her palm hit Harry’s cheek so hard he staggered back and fell into the chair. His back hit the back of it and Harry screamed and fell forward onto his knees at the woman’s feet.

“So the master *is* torturing you,” said the woman. “Good.”

She walked away and Harry struggled to his feet, leaning on his chair. He looked across the compound and saw Voldemort looking back.

Harry felt someone take his arm to help him straighten up.

“Who was that?” said Harry.

“I can’t tell you,” said Snape. “All your questions must be directed to him.”

“That is his protection?” said Harry.

“If you wish retribution, complain to him,” said Snape.

Which Harry wouldn’t do. He looked at his plate but had lost his appetite. He moved to the map tarp and looked around for something to do. He found a map of the camp and looked at, pretending not to notice all the activity.

A huge tarp was erected with scores of tables pushed together to make one long one. It seemed as if every Death Eater and their families had shown up for this particular celebration.

Harry wanted no part of it although his curiosity was nagging him. No one bothered him although he knew Voldemort was watching him. He picked up the map again. It seemed that someone was trying to map of the camp similarly to the way the Marauder’s Map was made but wasn’t doing a very good job. Wormtail.

His father had managed to make it work. Maybe Harry could. It gave him something to do, if nothing else. He took the parchment to his tent, expecting Voldemort to signal. When he didn’t, Harry looked across the compound.

Voldemort was in deep conversation with the Malfoys.

Harry worked on the map, which detracted his attention from the pain and from the noise outside his tent, which went on for hours. Harry was surprised when, with the help of several spell books, he was able to get several dots to appear on the map. They weren't labeled but they moved.

The chatter, the laughing and occasionally music went on. Voldemort didn't signal once. It was almost as if Harry wasn't invited. Was this part of Voldemort's plan? Was he playing up the neglect scenario again? Harry had no desire to celebrate with the Death Eaters but why wasn't Voldemort forcing him too?

Harry sighed and glanced at his watch, which was good as new once he had replaced the band. 12:30. He couldn't concentrate on the map anymore. The pain was back and now he had a headache from trying to figure out what Voldemort was up to.

Harry tapped the watch with his finger. "What should I be doing?"

You should be peacefully sleeping at Hogwarts, not in great pain, listening a party, flashed the watch.

He tapped it again. "Commentary."

Mr. Padfoot thinks Harry should call Rowan.

Mr. Moony agrees with Mr. Padfoot.

Mr. Wormtail thinks Master Harry should stop fighting the master and call his phoenix.

"Come on Dad," said Harry, staring at the watch.

Mr. Prongs thinks his son is indeed stubborn and should call his phoenix.

Harry looked to the door of his tent. As he called Rowan, Severus Snape entered.

"Pain too much?" said Snape.

"Just too annoying," said Harry. "What is it?"

"Too many visitors," said Snape. "You are being temporarily relocated. This tent is needed."

"He could send me back to school," said Harry.

"He doesn't want to," said Snape. "Come along."

Harry put the map and several papers in his desk and locked it. "Where—"

Rowan soared in and landed on Harry's arm. After she finished yelling at him, via song, she leaned on his shoulder and let her tears fall down his back.

"Thanks, Girl," said Harry.

Harry moved with Snape through the camp, Rowan perched on his arm, her head against his chest.

Snape stopped at a tent.

"That's Voldemort's tent," said Harry.

"Yes."

"I'm not staying in there."

"He ordered it, Harry. You have to," said Snape. "I doubt you'll see him tonight anyway. There are too many visitors and he has to address the Dementors."

"The Dementors?" said Harry with dawning. "The Dementors?" he said again with horror. "Azkaban. He's broken open Azkaban."

Harry flinched, not needing to turn around to know why.

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort.

Harry turned to him. "That was Mrs. Lestrangle, wasn't it? Who hit me?"

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort.

She blamed Harry for their 15 years in that Hell. No wonder she was glad Harry was being tortured.

"You didn't want me here because of them, did you?" said Harry.

"Oh, but I did want you here, Harry," said Voldemort. "It was one of the reasons I called you. This celebration was not only for the Lestrangle's but for you."

"Why?" said Harry.

"All my Death Eaters must acknowledge you. Despite your clever little manipulation, you need to be here with me, even if I decided that you didn't have to attend the celebration if you didn't wish to."

"Why?" said Harry, growing even more confused.

"You stubbornly refused to call Rowan," said Voldemort. "I would not force you to sit and endure the pain."

Harry was getting another headache. "No, why do the Death Eaters have to acknowledge me?"

"You know why, Harry," said Voldemort with a smirk. "They have accepted it even if you haven't."

Harry was almost shaking with frustration. Was nothing of his life under his control?

Voldemort studied him a minute then turned to Rowan. He reached out and stroked her. "I'm glad you called her, Harry. It was a rare gift for my guests."

"Meaning?" said Harry.

"A phoenix flying its hardest is a spectacular sight to behold, Harry," said Voldemort. "It glows with its internal flame. Quite magnificent."

Rowan fluttered her wings importantly.

"There aren't any Dementors here are there?" said Harry.

Voldemort turned his attention from Rowan to Harry. "No, Harry. They are deep in the forest. I won't let them near you."

Harry almost said thank you. He nodded.

Voldemort held a hand under Harry's face, not touching but forcing Harry to look at him.

"You are under my protection," said Voldemort.

"You didn't stop Mrs. Lestrangle--"

"Do you wish me to do something about that, Harry?"

Run to Voldemort. "I can take care of myself," grumbled Harry.

Voldemort nudged Harry's chin so Harry would meet his gaze. "Really?" said Voldemort. "It appears to me that you can just *take* it."

Something about that statement really bothered Harry. "Well since most of *it* comes from *you*, it's a wonder I'm still alive."

Voldemort frowned at him. "Harry, you are being stubborn and difficult. Now that you are healed, perhaps you'd like to join the festivities. It may cheer you up."

Harry pulled his face away from Voldemort's hand and looked away. Voldemort was doing it again. "Will you make me?" said Harry.

"No, Harry."

"Will you beg me?" said Harry, hoping to get something out of Voldemort.

That got the chuckle. "If you would like me to," said Voldemort. "But I don't think you would like what I would say to you in front of all my Death Eaters."

Harry was afraid that was probably true. Speechless, Harry turned away. "I'm leaving, Voldemort," said Harry.

"You won't," said Voldemort.

Harry turned back. "I will."

"You won't defy me, Harry," said Voldemort. "You are bound by the contract. I know your sense of honor. You won't leave me until I say you can."

Harry was all ready angry, now he was frustrated too because he knew Voldemort was right. Harry watched Voldemort turn and start walking away.

"Voldemort," said Harry. "I-"

"Crucio!"

Harry hit the ground on his hands and knees. He looked up. Voldemort had not thrown the curse. Not that it did anything but throw Harry off his feet and startle Rowan.

Voldemort turned toward the tables. Harry hadn't realized that everyone had been watching.

"Who did that?" said Voldemort in a quiet, deadly tone.

A wizard stood up. "Why do you take that boy's lip, Master?" said the man, looking highly confused.

Voldemort sighed. "I will tell you only once, Rodolphus. No one touches this boy but me. NO ONE," said Voldemort. "He is mine to deal with."

Harry got to his feet, his anger growing. He didn't *have* to take it from the Death Eaters and he was strong enough to prove it. He raised his hand toward the man.

"No, Harry," said Voldemort. "That is Rodolphus Lestranger."

“So,” said Harry. “I didn’t put him in Azkaban.” He still held his arm out toward the man and his eyes were locked in Lestrangle’s, who looked a bit disconcerted now.

“Who did?” said Voldemort.

“He did,” said Harry.

“Very good, Harry,” said Voldemort. “Why?”

“I’m in no mood for your tests, Voldemort,” said Harry.

“Answer correctly, Harry, and I will allow you to go back to Hogwarts.”

Harry turned his attention back to Voldemort. The thought of leaving was more appealing than hitting Lestrangle with a curse.

“Choices,” said Harry.

Voldemort moved toward Harry, through the flinch zone and he grabbed Harry’s face. The second Harry hit his knees, Rowan flew from the top of the tent, where she had moved when Harry was thrown to the ground, to his shoulder. Harry felt no pain because of Rowan’s tears but Voldemort didn’t let go of him.

“That is correct, Harry,” said Voldemort. “But remember, your attempt at manipulation changed nothing and now the whole wizarding world knows it.”

Harry didn’t like the sound of that. “What do you mean?” he asked.

Voldemort shook his head. “You will find out, Harry.”

“I’m asking you, Voldemort,” said Harry. Voldemort let go and Harry stood up. Voldemort was walking away.

All you have to do is ask.

“Voldemort, tell me,” said Harry. “I asked you.”

“Will you beg me?” said Voldemort.

Voldemort knew that would shut Harry up. So much for Malfoy's theory. "So can I leave now?" said Harry.

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort with a dismissive wave. "You may go."

Harry sent Rowan off then with a nightmarish thought, apparated back to the Gryffindor common room.

As quietly as he could, Harry went up to the dormitory and got changed.

"Harry, is that you?" said Neville.

"Yeah," said Harry softly. "I'm sorry I woke you. Go back to sleep."

"I wasn't sleeping," said Neville. "Where have you been?"

"I got lost in Hell," Harry grumbled automatically.

"Why do you keep going back then?"

Harry didn't really feel like explaining but he wasn't all that tired. He guessed Neville had endured his own sort of pain due to Voldemort tearing apart his family. Neville deserved an answer.

"I'm bound to a wizard's contract," said Harry. "Like the Triwizard Tournament. I *have* to go every time he signals."

"He can signal you?" said Neville.

Harry sat down on the end of Neville's bed and told him.

"What's Voldemort like?" said Neville.

Harry opened his mouth but then saw how serious Neville looked. Then Harry realized that Neville had said Voldemort's name. It was no more than a whisper, but he had said it.

Harry thought for a moment. "Well," said Harry. "He's definitely brilliant. His mind works so quickly that it's amazing. He always seems one step ahead of everyone else. As if he already planned the outcome."

"He's very demanding. You do what he says, when he says it and you better do it to his satisfaction."

"Sounds like my grandmother," muttered Neville.

"Don't say that, Neville," said Harry softly. "She doesn't torture you if you make a mistake, does she?"

Neville shuddered and Harry wished he could take the words back.

"No," said Neville just as softly. "What's it like? Being tortured?"

Harry almost answered flippantly but again thought Neville deserved an honest answer.

"He's tortured you, hasn't he, Harry?" said Neville.

Harry sighed. "Yes, Neville. He has."

"What's it like?"

"It's very hard to explain," said Harry. "Pain comes in different degrees and it depends on how each person can deal with it before the body shuts down—"

"Or goes mad," said Neville.

Since Harry knew that Neville's parents were both tortured to madness by the Death Eaters, he knew he had to tread carefully.

"I guess," said Harry. "But I would say that if a person is driven to madness then they'd have to have the strongest, bravest type of character there is."

"Why?" said Neville.

"Well, if they were being tortured just for the sake of being tortured, then it would end because being mad wouldn't cause the torturer any satisfaction. But if they were being tortured for information, then that person would know that that information must not get out. That person would be sacrificing themselves for the good of others by

going mad rather than shutting down and getting tortured again. It protects that information forever.”

Neville looked at Harry as if he had just given him a very expensive Christmas present.

“You know about my parents, don’t you, Harry?” said Neville.

Harry nodded. “I’m sorry, Neville. I found out by accident. I never told anyone.”

“It’s all right,” said Neville. “I don’t mind that you know, after everything that you’ve been through.” Neville looked at Harry very directly. “Do you believe everything you just said?”

“Yes, Neville,” said Harry. “I truly do. Your parents were strong, self-sacrificing and incredibly brave. You should be very proud of them.”

“I am,” said Neville. Then his expression turned so sad. “They wouldn’t be proud of me.”

“Don’t say that Neville,” said Harry. “Of course they’d be proud of you. You are their son. They are a part of you. They’ll come out from inside you when you need them. Take my word for it.”

Neville managed a weak smile. “Thanks, Harry.”

Harry stood up and moved to his bed. “Good night, Neville.”

Chapter 6

What's in a Name?

Harry woke up late again and once again found himself looking for Ginny. He had found himself spending a lot of time with Ginny lately. Whatever was between Ron and Hermione seemed to have taken root and they seemed to want to spend a lot of time together. Harry had seen it coming and despite the fact that he missed them, he didn't want to spoil their happiness.

Ginny was his savior. She had Ron's sense of humor, so she could usually make Harry laugh and although she didn't have Hermione's book smarts, she had an uncommon amount of common sense. Her past bravery in front of Voldemort and the one time they had danced together also had latched itself in Harry's memory, so he didn't find it at all difficult to hang out with her when Ron and Hermione couldn't be found.

She relaxed him. She fixed him.

They were together now on the grass beside the lake. Harry was stretched out on his back, his hands behind his head, his ankles crossed and his eyes closed against the sun. Ginny sat beside him, leaning on her hands, arms stretched out behind her so she could tilt her head back and soak up the late fall sun.

"Harry?"

"Hmmm?"

"Is that your real name?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, is it a nick name for Henry or Harold?" said Ginny.

Harry moved his arm and held it up against the sun to look at her. She hadn't moved. "I don't know," said Harry.

Ginny turned her head to look down at him. "You don't know?"

"I never thought about it," said Harry.

"You don't even know what your full name is?" said Ginny, starting to sound angry.

Harry dropped his arm and closed his eyes again. Damn it if that didn't hurt.

"That is so pathetic," said Ginny angrily.

"I know," whispered Harry.

"Damn it, not you, Harry," shouted Ginny. "That woman who raised you should be shot."

Harry had to smile. Ginny always defended him fiercely.

"You should ask Sirius," said Ginny. "He'll know. He's your godfather."

"Maybe I will," said Harry.

"Aren't you curious?" said Ginny. "I would be."

Since Harry had enough curiosity to deal with he turned the conversation. "So what about you?" said Harry. "Is Ginny your given name?"

"No," said Ginny hesitantly. "I'm not crazy about my given name."

Now Harry was curious. He sat up and wrapped his arms around his knees looking at her. "Well?"

Ginny looked at him. "Harry-"

"Aw, tell me Ginny. I won't tell anyone," said Harry. "If you don't want me to."

Ginny turned her head to look out over the lake. "It's Ginevra," said Ginny. "Ginevra Molly Weasley."

"I like it," said Harry. "Sounds very adult."

Ginny glanced at him. He smiled at her. "Are you teasing me, Harry Potter?"

"Do I look like I'm teasing you?"

"Quite honestly, yes," said Ginny.

Harry laughed. "I'm not, Ginny, I swear. But I think you are out growing Ginny."

Ginny looked back at the lake. "And what would *you* call me?"

"You probably wouldn't like the response off the top of my head so give me a minute," said Harry with a smirk.

Ginny made a disgruntled sound and shoved him. Harry hit his side. His Quidditch training kicked in and he had her on her back, her hands pinned over her head in less than a moment.

Harry started to tell her that he was teasing but the sight of her knocked the breath out of him. She was breathing hard, her eyes shining, her hair spilled out around her. He felt like he had just captured an angel.

She stared up at him as intently as he stared at her. Her eyes almost beckoning.

Just kiss her.

Harry shocked himself by thinking that. But that was exactly what he wanted to do.

Her gaze softened suddenly as she looked at him. "Harry," she sighed.

A dozen Snitches taking off in his chest couldn't have sounded so sweet.

Harry's head lowered. Ginny closed her eyes.

"Arry, everything okay out here?"

Harry threw himself to the side, holding a hand to his face. Ginny sat up also, looking away from Hagrid as he came striding over.

"Yeah we're fine," said Harry.

"Thought maybe Ginny had fallen into the lake, or somthin'" said Hagrid.

"No," said Ginny. "I'm fine."

She sounded pretty irritated to Harry though and Harry felt a wave of guilt hit him. What was he thinking? He'd almost kissed her. She'd never speak to him again now and Ron would kill him.

Harry got up. "Well I should get back. I've got lessons with McGonagall in a few minutes." He walked away. He didn't look at Hagrid. He didn't look at Ginny. He just wanted to be somewhere else at that moment.

His transfiguration lesson went smoothly considering the fact that Harry was sure he was going to be expelled from the Weasley family.

Transfiguration was going well. Harry had chosen a hawk to transform into. He had done extensive research (which was required) and he had been under McGonagall grueling personal attention. He didn't mind it. He was forbidden to tell anyone about it however. Anyone who knew he was training (which was only Sirius, Remus, Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Dumbledore) were not told what he had chosen. Harry kind of liked that.

Voldemort knew as well but neither one of them brought it up again.

McGonagall had told Harry he had done well again this lesson and Harry left with a smile until he remembered what he had done to Ginny.

Harry didn't think he could bear it. His only family, his best friend, - Ginny.

Harry felt rejected and dejected as he made his way up to Gryffindor Tower. He felt even worse as he reached his dorm room and found

an owl waiting for him. More accurately, an owl recovering from delivering a letter. Errol.

Harry,

Ron says you've been spending a lot of time with Ginny. We'd be real mad if she got hurt for any reason. See that it doesn't happen.

George and Fred Weasley

Harry started to shake. It was happening already. Harry had lost the Weasleys.

How Harry got through the rest of the day was a complete mystery. The whole thing was a fog. He didn't bother going to Divination, 1- because he didn't want to face Ron and 2- because he didn't want to hear Trelawney predicting more horror for him. He sat in the common room staring at the fire. Misery settled around him again. Without Ron, without the Weasleys, without Ginny, Harry was lost.

"Harry Potter!"

Harry looked up. Hermione was standing over him, her fists on her waist and her foot tapping impatiently.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" she demanded.

Just the fact that she was there, told Harry she was worried. Hermione didn't ditch Arithmancy for no reason.

"I – um- don't feel well," said Harry.

SMACK. Her palm hit his cheek.

"Don't lie to me, Harry Potter, I've known you too long," said Hermione angrily. "Tell me what's wrong."

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. Hermione sat down in the chair in front of him and took his hands. More gently, she said, "Tell me, Harry."

It all spilled out then. His feelings for Ginny. How he had wanted to kiss her. That she rejected him. That the Weasley's were against him. How alone he felt again.

Hermione just sat there and listened for once.

Harry looked at her and could see that "you're being ridiculous" look in her face.

"And before you go telling me I'm wrong remember that I've been in this situation before and I know what it feels like," said Harry.

"Oh, and what about Sirius," she challenged. "What about me? Are we chopped liver? We don't count."

Great, more guilt. "That's not--"

"I know," said Hermione. "But the fact is, you should be talking to Ginny about this. Not her brothers. Did she say she didn't want to talk to you anymore?"

"No," said Harry. "But she didn't sound as if she did."

"And you're such an expert?" said Hermione sarcastically.

"Ouch," said Harry.

"Well, honestly, you know it's true," said Hermione. "Go and talk to her."

"All right, Hermione," said Harry. "You're right. I will."

"Good. Just do it before Saturday. You're playing Quidditch against Ravenclaw, remember."

Harry groaned.

"So what are we doing here," demanded Ginny as she looked around.

They were back out by the lake, but this time closer to the forest and hidden from the view of Hagrid's hut.

"I wanted to apologize," said Harry.

"For what?"

"For whatever I did to upset you."

"Who said you upset me," said Ginny.

"Well Fred and George threatening me and Ron not talking to me sort of clued me in," said Harry.

Ginny stood there with her mouth open.

"And you—" Harry had to clear his throat, it had gone hoarse. "You were angry when you told Hagrid you were ok."

Harry stared at the ground. Ginny jerked up his chin with her hand. "They threatened you?"

Harry nodded. "I got an owl."

"And Ron?"

"Hasn't spoken to me."

Ginny started laughing. Harry stared at her but she didn't stop. Harry felt a hole burning in his chest and he turned away.

"WAIT," shouted Ginny. "I'm sorry."

Harry couldn't look at her.

"It's just my protective brothers are so stupid."

Harry was clueless so he continued to look at the ground. Ginny moved around to face him and put her hand gently on his face. She lifted it until he met her gaze.

"They think I'm upset because of what you did," said Ginny.

"You aren't?"

“No, Harry. I’m upset because of what you didn’t do.”

“What didn’t I do?” said Harry warily.

“I wanted you to kiss me,” said Ginny shyly. “Didn’t you want to?”

“Hell, yes,” Harry blurted out, then clamped his mouth closed until realization set in. “You wanted me too?”

Ginny blushed and her eyes took on that same shine as the last time. Harry didn’t hesitate this time. He grabbed her, pulled her into his arms and pressed his mouth over hers.

Harry wasn’t quite prepared for the feelings that erupted inside him. It was like every one of his vital organs ceased to function then started working twice as hard. They malfunctioned altogether as he felt Ginny’s arms wrap around him. She was kissing him back.

After a moment, Harry held her away and stared down at her. She stared back, her arms still around his neck.

“Ginny, I-I’m-“

She pressed her fingers to his lips. “Harry, don’t,” said Ginny. “We’re fated.”

“What do you mean?” said Harry.

“Rowan told me.”

“Rowan?” said Harry. They were both talking so softly, Harry didn’t dare move away from her. Not that he wanted to. “You can understand her.”

“Yes,” said Ginny. “I didn’t name her. She told me that was her name. She told me that you were my wizard too.”

Harry blinked at her. She was grinning. Rowan didn’t consider herself Harry’s Phoenix she considered Harry *her* wizard.

He laughed and put his hand to her face. She leaned her cheek into his palm, closing her eyes.

“Ginger,” said Harry softly. She raised her gaze to his and he leaned down and kissed her again. She had been right. It *did* feel right. Actually, it felt wonderful.

Ginny looked up at him. “Ginger?”

Harry pulled her into a hug. “The spice in my life,” whispered Harry.

Ginny sighed, tightening her arms around him. “I like it.”

Later, Harry found a very annoyed looking Ron and a very amused looking Hermione staring down at him in the common room.

“What did you do to my sister?” said Ron, talking a chair across from Harry.

Harry glanced at Hermione who looked up at the ceiling.

“Why, what’s wrong with her?” said Harry.

“Well, she’s acting like a ding bat,” said Ron. “You must have done something. You were the last one to talk to her.”

“Um, well,” said Harry, sending Hermione another look, willing her to say something, to help him. “I – er – kissed her.”

Hermione took that moment to speak up. “Must have been some kiss, Harry.”

So much for help. He glanced at Ron expecting him to stand up and deck Harry.

Ron blinked at him. “So it’s true,” said Ron. “You like her.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Honestly, Ron, you are so dense.”

“She’s my sister,” said Ron.

“So,” said Hermione. “He’s your best friend.”

“I know that-“

“And your whole family has already adopted him,” said Hermione. “So what if Ginny loves him.”

Harry looked back and forth between the two of them as they bickered about he and Ginny.

“Excuse me,” said Harry finally. They looked at him. “Do you mind if me and Ginny decide our future for ourselves.”

Hermione laughed. Ron grinned at him. “Sorry, Harry,” said Ron. “It just feels weird, having your best friend interested in your little sister.”

“She’s 15, Ron,” said Harry. “And did I complain when you and Hermione became a couple.”

Hermione turned red and Ron looked at the floor.

“And don’t tell anyone,” said Harry. “I mean apart from your family, no one,” Harry stressed.

“Why not?” said Hermione.

Harry stared at her. “Why do you think?”

Hermione covered her mouth with her hand, obviously recalling the conversation the two of them had had before the dance last year. “Voldemort,” she whispered.

It was a Saturday morning a week later and Harry woke up late again. His Transfiguration lesson the night before had gone late because McGonagall had felt Harry had mastered the task of the actual transformation and wanted him to transform over and over again. She had also brought him up to Dumbledore’s office to show him.

Dumbledore had seemed impressed, so Harry was pleased. They both also stressed the point of not telling anyone what he could transform into nor showing it to anyone. They told him he wasn’t going to be registered. It was almost like they considered it some sort of secret weapon.

Harry was puzzled but didn't ask. He had learned in the past, the less he knew, the better.

He spotted Ron, Hermione and Ginny down at the far end of the Gryffindor table and moved to them. Several students stopped talking as Harry passed them. Since it had become so common, Harry didn't notice.

But as he got closer, he noticed Ron looked angry and the girls looked upset.

"-have to tell him," said Ron insistently.

"Tell who what?" said Harry, sitting down next to Ron across from Hermione and Ginny. But Harry had a bad feeling it was himself and that he wasn't going to like it. He became sure when Ginny looked away and Hermione sat there with her mouth open.

Harry looked at Ron. Hermione gasped and when Harry looked back at her, found her looking at the doors. Harry turned in his seat and saw Sirius striding toward him.

Sirius? Great. Harry stood up as Sirius approached him and gave him a hug.

"What are you doing here?" said Harry.

"Are you all right?" said Sirius.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

Sirius looked at Ron and Ron shook his head. Hermione bit her lip.

"Great," said Harry. "What's going on?"

"Harry, come with me," said Sirius.

"What's wrong now?" said Harry as they moved out of the Great Hall.

"Just come," said Sirius.

Sirius took him to Dumbledore's office, which was open and when they had moved up the moving staircase, they found Dumbledore's inner office crowded. Remus was there as well as Professor Snape, Professor McGonagall, Mr. Weasley, Ludo Bagman and even the Minister of Magic himself, Mr. Goodhue.

This couldn't be good. "What's wrong?" said Harry. "What's happened?"

"Come in, Harry," said Dumbledore.

Harry inched in, looking at all the worried faces staring back at him.

Bagman stepped up to him. "Do you know about Azkaban?"

Harry glanced at Snape. "Yes," Harry told Bagman. "I found out last week."

"Did you aid in any way?" said Bagman.

"What do you mean aid?" said Harry, getting confused.

"Did you help the Death Eaters liberate Azkaban."

"What?" said Harry, horrified. "No. Why would I? I can't even get near a Dementor without passing out." He looked up at Sirius. Sirius laid a hand on Harry's shoulder.

The Minister stepped before him. "Harry," said Mr. Goodhue. "Have you joined him?"

"What?" now Harry was incredulous. "NO!" He looked around at all the skeptical faces. Even Mr. Weasley looked concerned. "What's going on?"

"I told you," said Sirius. "He doesn't know."

Dumbledore nodded.

"Know what?" said Harry.

“Harry,” said Dumbledore. “Voldemort has taken steps to make the wizarding world think that you’ve joined him.”

“What?” said Harry. “How?”

“It has a lot of people very afraid,” said Goodhue.

“But everyone in this room knows that I’d die first,” said Harry.

“But to the community-“

“What has he done?” Harry cut the Minister off. He looked at Sirius.

“What’s he done now?”

Sirius sighed. “The wizarding world thinks he bought you,” said Sirius.

“Bought me,” echoed Harry confused again. “I don’t understand.”

The Minister of Magic handed him a copy of the Daily Prophet. Harry read the headline:

Entire Slytherin Estate Bequeathed To Harry Potter

Chapter 7

The Balance of Power

Harry looked up at Sirius, puzzled.

“He’s legally and publicly made you his heir, Harry,” said Sirius.

It felt like a knife had sunk into his chest.

All my Death Eaters must acknowledge you. They have accepted it, even if you haven’t.

And now the whole wizarding world knows it.

“NO!” cried Harry, dropping the paper as if it had burned him. He looked around at all the people looking at him and shook his head. “NO,” said Harry, taking a step back. “It can’t be possible.”

“It is possible,” said Sirius. “And he did it.”

Harry stared at Sirius. He started to shake. Anger and helplessness coursed through him. He felt like a trap door had opened underneath him. Harry turned and ran from the room.

Harry found himself down by the lake and considered flinging himself into it.

More of Voldemort’s manipulation that Harry couldn’t do anything about.

What a nightmare.

Harry stared into the flames, his fists clenched at his sides. He felt Voldemort approach and move around the fire. Harry wasn’t sure why he was there or what he was even going to say.

Voldemort studied him as he settled into his chair. “I can see by that expression that you heard about my gift,” said Voldemort.

Harry looked at him. "Your gift," said Harry incredulously. "I can't be bought."

"Ah, is that what everyone is thinking?"

"As if you didn't plan it," said Harry. Voldemort chuckled. "That was a pretty underhanded tactic, Voldemort. Even for you."

"Harry, I was honoring you," said Voldemort.

"Honoring me," scoffed Harry. "Do I look honored?"

"How do you feel about it then?"

"Angry," said Harry.

"Well, I can see that," said Voldemort. "What else?"

Harry stared back into the fire. "Trapped."

"By what?"

Harry looked up. "By you."

"By me?" said Voldemort with surprise. "Harry, I have not trapped you. You have trapped yourself."

"How do you figure that?"

"Choices, Harry. Remember."

"But I won't join you, Voldemort," said Harry. "Trying to convince everyone else that I already have isn't going to change my mind. I know the truth and you know the truth."

"Stubborn," said Voldemort. "But the truth is only how you perceive it."

Why couldn't he speak in plain English? "I don't understand," said Harry.

"I know, Harry," said Voldemort. "It's very complicated."

“Tell me.”

“You are destined to kill me, Harry, but you are also destined to join me.”

“How can I do both?” said Harry.

“You will find a way.”

“Well that doesn’t help much,” said Harry.

“Always the cynic, my Harry,” said Voldemort .

Harry glared at him.

“It’s very simple, Harry,” said Voldemort. “Accept me and we will rule the world and share great power.”

Harry opened his mouth but Voldemort raised a hand.

“With the perfect balance of power.”

Harry closed his mouth. *The heirs reunite, the balance of power restored?* “The prophecy?” said Harry.

“Yes, Harry,” said Voldemort. “Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin did great things. They created Hogwarts, for one. The only place you and I found happiness as children.”

“What are you saying?” said Harry. “That you intend to renounce the dark arts?”

Voldemort laughed. “Oh, no, Harry,” said Voldemort. “But what an extraordinary concept that would be.” He chuckled again. “It is too late for me. You know I am inherently evil.”

Harry sat down, transfixed.

“You are inherently good,” said Voldemort. “The balance of power.”

“You expect the entire Ministry of Magic to step down and let-“

“Oh, they won’t. They will need some persuading. But I will deal with that.”

“Murder and Mayhem, chaos and anarchy,” said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled again. “Well there is always discord before peace and justice is restored,” said Voldemort. “That is where you come in.”

“Me?” said Harry.

Voldemort stood up and moved around the fire to stand over Harry. Harry flinched and looked up at him. His thoughts were a mess.

He reached out and touched Harry’s face. “You will be as powerful as I am one day, Harry,” said Voldemort. “But until that day, you are not ready.”

Harry stared into those red eyes. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

“Stop fighting your destiny and accept me.”

Harry closed his eyes against the pain. Not only the pain from Voldemort’s touch, but a pain had developed in his chest. When he opened his eyes again, he found Voldemort studying him closely. He moved his hand to Harry’s chin, holding his face up. Not that Harry could look away. Voldemort’s stare was too frightening in its intensity.

“I have killed your parents. I have tried to kill you. I have tortured you and I have manipulated you,” said Voldemort. “But I have also protected you, taught you, given you my magical strength, my favor and my attention. And I have gone to Azkaban for you.

“I have become very fond of you, Harry,” said Voldemort. “You have pleased me very much and you have made me very proud. You can make me laugh. Not many people can do that.” He raised another hand toward Harry’s face but didn’t touch him. “I have legally made you my son. Our connection continues to grow. I am as a part of you as you are a part of me.”

Harry wished he would stop, but knew that he wasn’t finished. Harry’s emotions were all ready bent to the breaking point.

“You know I’m right, Harry,” said Voldemort. “You came to me again today and I have explained everything to you. You always come back to me.” Voldemort moved his hands away from Harry’s face, still searching Harry’s expression. “What does that tell you?”

Harry felt like his brain was in overload now too.

“Go back to school, Harry,” said Voldemort. “I have given you much to think about.”

Harry turned away from Voldemort to stare into the fire. “Voldemort?”

“Yes, Harry?”

“Are you stronger than Dumbledore?”

“I am now,” said Voldemort. “The only wizard in the entire world who I can’t kill and who can destroy me is Harry Potter and he is now my son.”

Harry felt Voldemort moving away and that deep rooted fear clutched in his chest again. Pain grew in response to it and grabbed his heart the same way Voldemort grabbed his face.

He apparated directly to Sirius and sat down in front of a desk, staring at the side of it. Sirius stood up and moved around the desk.

“Harry,” said Sirius carefully. He lowered before Harry to look into his face. Harry focused on his dark eyes.

“He’s winning,” said Harry.

“Don’t say that, Harry.”

“He is,” said Harry. “I can’t win.”

“Harry-“

“It’s like he knows everything about me. What I’m thinking, what I’m feeling.” Harry’s voice went hoarse and he cleared it. “He knows what I’ll do before I do it.”

“Harry-“

“Sirius,” said Harry seriously. “He *is* controlling me. He’s beaten me.”

“No, Harry,” said Sirius. “He’s trying to make you think that. He using your emotions to manipulate you.”

“I know, but I can’t stop him.”

“You can,” said Sirius. “Fight him.”

Harry grabbed Sirius’ hand, staring into his eyes. “How, Sirius? Tell me how,” pleaded Harry. “He’s tearing me apart. Tell me how.”

Sirius shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Harry wasn’t sure how he got through the next few weeks. Dumbledore had spoken to him and had lectured again about choices.

The Ministry of Magic had posted a statement that Harry had no knowledge of the bequeathment and was still safe at Hogwarts under Dumbledore’s protection.

Voldemort had found the statement amusing and had sent Harry an owl reassuring him that he was still under Voldemort’s protection, which irritated Harry. Harry had written back that he could take care of himself. To which Voldemort replied:

I know, Harry. But you don’t have to.

Which only reminded Harry of Voldemort’s manipulations.

Harry was dreading the Christmas break, which was approaching.

“Do you want me to go with you,” said Ron one day out of the blue.

“Go where?” said Harry.

“To You-Know – I mean to Voldemort’s compound?”

“Why?”

“Well it’s clear he’s upsetting you,” said Ron. “I thought, well, I could go with you as, you know, moral support.”

Harry stared at him. “You’d do that?” said Harry.

“Harry, you idiot, of course I would,” said Ron. “We both know I’m safe under the contract. You’re the only one who isn’t safe from You-I mean, Voldemort’s manipulations. If I’m there, maybe I can keep you grounded.”

Harry felt the weight on his chest lighten. “Oh, Ron,” said Harry. “That would be great. Will your parents let you?”

“My father suggested it.”

Harry grabbed Ron by the shoulders. “Ron, you don’t know what this means to me.”

Ron shrugged. “It’s not easy being Harry Potter’s best friend but I’m damned good at it.”

Harry smiled. “You’re damned right, you are.”

“You better ask him first though, Harry,” said Ron. “Don’t want to breach the contract.”

“Good point.”

Harry sent Voldemort a brief note asking if he could bring Ron with him and Voldemort’s reply didn’t surprise Harry.

Ah, moral support. I have said before, Harry, you have brave and loyal friends. Of course you may bring Ron home to visit. He will be a welcomed guest.

“I hate this,” grumbled Ginny, fussing with Harry’s collar. “I really do.”

“I know, Ginger, but I have to go.”

“Why can’t I go?” demanded Ginny. “I’m not afraid.”

"I know you aren't," said Harry. "But I told you, he can't know about us."

"But you're taking Ron."

"Ron's my best friend," said Harry. "And he's been there before."

"But I'm a Weasley too," said Ginny.

"Ginger," pleaded Harry.

"Fine!" she snapped. She grabbed Harry's face, kissed him once hard on the mouth and stormed away.

"Trouble in paradise?" said Ron as he walked into the common room looking back at his sister. Ron had been in the other room saying good bye to Hermione, who came out right behind him.

"Yeah, your sister's mad now," said Harry.

"She's just worried about you, Harry," said Hermione as she stepped up to him and kissed his cheek. "So am I. You both be careful."

Harry nodded and looked at Ron. "Ready?"

Ron nodded and Harry got a grip on Ron's arm.

Another nightmare.

Ron and Harry apparated in front of the fire and Harry looked around. Voldemort was nowhere to be seen but a Death Eater approached them.

"Welcome home, Master Harry," said the man. "I am Dorian Michaels. Please follow me."

"Where is Voldemort?" said Harry.

"The master is in conference," said Mr. Michaels as he led them toward Harry's tent. "He will send for you when he is free. Your tent has been altered to include a private room for Mr. Weasley. I hope it meets with your satisfaction."

Ron looked impressed. Harry got mad. "Grounded, Ron," said Harry. "Remember."

"Oh, yeah," said Ron. "I'm sure it's fine, Mr. Michaels."

"If it isn't, Master Harry," he said. "Please inform me so the master can punish those responsible."

Harry didn't like the sound of that and to his dismay, they found Ron's room to be a disaster. Ron laughed but Harry recognized it for what it was – a test.

"Why are you laughing?" Harry asked irritably. "This is a test to see if I'll use the authority Voldemort forced on me."

"I know, Harry," said Ron. "But it back fired."

"What do you mean?"

"Harry," said Ron, still smiling. "This is what my room usually looks like. I love it."

Harry stared at him.

"I only straighten it up when I know you are coming to stay."

"You like it?" said Harry.

"Yeah. It's fine."

Harry laughed.

They were in the middle of a game of wizards chess when Voldemort signaled.

"Do you want me to come?" said Ron.

"Not yet," said Harry. "I'm not sure how he'll react to the test yet."

Harry moved through the compound. Several Death Eaters acknowledge him with a courteous nod and Harry wanted to scream. He ducked into Voldemort's tent.

"Ah, Harry. Come in," said Voldemort. "How is everything?"

"As well as can be expected," said Harry as he took a seat in one of the chairs in front of Voldemort's desk.

"Meaning..."

"You know what I mean, Voldemort."

"But I don't, Harry. Tell me."

"I don't like being treated like royalty," said Harry. "Tell them to stop."

"*You* tell them to stop," said Voldemort. "They will do as you say. What displeases you, displeases me. You are my son."

Harry sighed and decided not to go *there*. "Can I go, Voldemort? I'm in the middle of a chess game with Ron that I might actually win."

Voldemort chuckled. "And are Ron's accommodations satisfactory?"

Harry stood up. "Oh, yes. Ron's happy as a clam."

Voldemort frowned. "Is he?"

Harry had to smile. "Sorry, Voldemort. I guess I failed your first test. If you ever saw Ron's room, you'd know he's perfectly comfortable with his room."

Voldemort laughed. "Ah, Harry. I have taught you well."

Harry stopped smiling.

"You have passed that test because you recognized it as a test. I did, in fact, know Ron would be happy with his room."

Why wasn't Harry surprised? "Of course," said Harry. "You know everything."

"Accept it, Harry," said Voldemort. "There is no other way for you. Your destiny is with me."

Harry ignored it. "May I leave your exalted presence now?"

Voldemort chuckled. "Yes, Harry."

Harry returned to his tent and Ron instantly grounded him.

"He just knows what teenage boys' rooms look like," said Ron.

"But mine—"

"Doesn't count. You didn't grow up normally. Neither did he."

Harry accepted Ron's excuse and did in fact win their game, which made Harry feel better.

"You didn't let me win, did you?" said Harry.

Ron looked at him as if he had two heads. "What do you think?"

Ron was right. Ron had enough competition. Ron *never let* any one win at chess. He took the game very seriously.

"I'm starving," said Ron.

"What a surprise," said Harry.

But as they left Harry's tent, they found the compound bustling with activity. Harry glanced around and saw Voldemort in his chair with five Death Eaters around him. All of them were talking at once.

"Something's wrong," said Harry. They both moved toward the fire.

"That's good isn't it?" said Ron.

"I don't know," said Harry. "Does Voldemort look worried to you?"

"Not really," said Ron.

"Exactly."

Voldemort held up his hand for silence and the Death Eaters instantly shut up.

"It is merely an inconvenience," said Voldemort.

"But master-"

"Enough," said Voldemort. "Make the necessary arrangements and I will tell you where and when." Voldemort noticed Harry at that moment and smiled with such satisfaction that Harry's stomach clenched up.

Harry stood behind his chair, Ron beside him. "What's going on?" said Harry.

"Leave us," Voldemort told the Death Eaters and they dispersed. To Harry he said, "Wormtail has been caught."

"Why aren't you worried?" said Harry.

"Sit, Harry." He looked at Ron and indicated another chair. "Because, Harry," said Voldemort. "Wormtail doesn't know enough to be a threat to me. The only inconvenience is that we will have to relocate the camp."

"Why do I get the feeling there's more," said Harry, sitting down. Ron sat too, looking interested.

Voldemort smiled. "Your instincts are very good, Harry," said Voldemort. "Wormtail isn't a threat to me. He is a threat to you."

Harry ran a hand through his hair. "I knew I wasn't going to like this."

Voldemort chuckled.

"Why is Wormtail a threat to Harry?" said Ron.

"Why do *you* think, Ron?" said Voldemort.

Harry looked up but Voldemort was staring at Harry as if Harry would know. Harry was afraid he *did* know and Ron figured it out.

"He's going to tell them that Harry's joined you," said Ron. "You've given him authority over the Death Eaters, you made him your heir." Ron looked at Harry. "He's going to rat you out."

“Indeed Ron. Very good,” said Voldemort. “He’s betrayed Harry’s father and now he will betray Harry.”

“But it’s a lie,” said Ron.

“Who will believe it?” said Voldemort.

“Everyone who knows Harry,” said Ron stubbornly.

“Perhaps,” said Voldemort and he turned to Harry. “So you are faced with a choice, Harry. Stay with me or go back and defend yourself against the charges.”

“Harry, everyone will defend you. The entire school knows the truth. Even Snape-“

Voldemort sighed patiently. “Ron, everyone knows that Severus is a spy for both sides. He will not be able to testify.”

Harry continued to stare at Voldemort. He remembered the smile. “This is a test,” said Harry. “Isn’t it?”

Voldemort chuckled. “Oh, Harry, how well you know me. Yes, it is but I will not be the one giving it to you.”

“I have to go back,” said Harry.

“If that is your choice,” said Voldemort.

“You will let me?”

“Of course, Harry. If Wormtail betrays you, you have every right to face him.”

Harry stood up. Ron did to.

“Oh Harry.”

Harry turned back to Voldemort.

"If it's any consolation," said Voldemort. "I heard it was Sirius who caught Wormtail and it took five wizards to keep him from killing Wormtail outright."

Harry absorbed that. If they hadn't stopped Sirius, Wormtail couldn't rat on Harry. "It's not," said Harry.

Harry apparated to La Casa Black (Ron had gone directly home to find out what was going on through his family).

"Arthur, it's ridiculous." Harry heard Sirius' voice raised in anger from the office.

"I know it and you know it but the ministry is in chaos over this."

Harry moved to the door.

Mr. Weasley went on. "The minute he gets back—"

"I'm here," said Harry, startling both men. "Am I under arrest?"

Mr. Weasley turned away. Sirius looked over Harry's expression. "So you know."

"He's told the Ministry that I've joined Voldemort, hasn't he?" said Harry.

"He's told them a lot more than that, Harry," said Sirius.

Great.

Chapter 8

The Trial

Harry sat in the courtroom, his wrists and ankles manacled. He wasn't sure what he was feeling. Confusion seemed to be prevailing.

He had listened to Wormtail ramble on and on about Harry's powers and his authority over the Death Eaters. How Voldemort favored him, gave Harry anything Harry asked for. How, ordered by Voldemort, Harry had done all three of the Unforgivable Curses, which was only partially right because Harry had done the Cruciatus Curse twice on his own out of anger.

But in reality, nothing Wormtail said was a lie. It was all true.

Harry was guilty.

True, most of it was only because Voldemort had manipulated it but Harry could have chosen not to protect his friends. He could have chosen not to do the curses and accepted not being allowed to go home.

Choices.

Harry took the stand, feeling numb. He was guilty.

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry looked up at the Minister of Magic.

"How do you plead?" said Mr. Goodhue.

"Guilty," said Harry.

"NO, HARRY," shouted Sirius.

The courtroom went into a tumult.

Harry looked at Sirius. "Everything he said was true, Sirius," said Harry in a hollow voice.

“So you *have* joined him?” said Mr. Goodhue.

“No, Minister,” said Harry. “I haven’t. I won’t.”

“But you do what he tells you?”

“Those were tests of my powers, Sir. If I didn’t do them, he wouldn’t let me leave.”

“How can he keep you?”

“He has me under wizards contract,” said Harry.

“Why would you contract with him?”

“To keep him from hurting my friends and family,” said Harry.

“So he is controlling you?”

“He can only make me go to him,” said Harry. “And my friends are protected by him through me by the contract.”

“He protects you.”

Harry nodded. “From everyone except himself,” said Harry softly.

“He tortures you?”

“He has,” said Harry. It seemed almost as if the Minister was pulling Harry’s defense out of Harry for him.

“Has he used the Imperius Curse on you?”

“He can’t,” said Harry.

Now the Minister appeared curious. “Why not?”

“The Imperius Curse and the Cruciatus Curse don’t work on me,” said Harry and a gasp went around the courtroom. “And he can’t kill me. The Killing Curse would rebound on him again.”

Another buzz went around the courtroom. Harry caught comments like: *a wizard who can counter all 3 unforgivable curses, I don't believe it, he can't be that powerful, must be a lie.*

"So how does he torture you?" asked Mr. Goodhue.

"He touches me," said Harry.

"His touch causes you pain?" said the Minister, sounding skeptical. In fact, another buzz of disbelief went around the courtroom.

It did actually sound far-fetched.

"I ask you again, Harry Potter," said the minister. "Have you joined Lord Voldemort?"

"NO," said Harry, loudly this time.

"And how do you plead to the charges?"

Since it seemed the Minister was trying to help, Harry said, "Guilty by coercion." Harry still felt guilty for letting Voldemort force him.

But the jury didn't seem to believe that Harry could be that powerful. Or that Voldemort would let him live if Harry wouldn't join him.

They judged him guilty.

Harry still felt numb.

When the verdict was handed down, Harry heard Sirius shouting again and Harry saw several guards subduing him.

Two guards approached Harry and he stood up, his chains dangling. They took his arms and led him toward the door, hearing a fervor of noise behind him. He was going to jail. He glanced back at Sirius who was still struggling with the guards and shouting his name.

An explosion on the other side of the room almost knocked Harry down.

Wizards in black robes and masks were apparating all over the room.

Harry's hand hit his scar as pain exploded in his head.

"Anyone who moves will die," said Voldemort who had apparated directly behind Harry. "You two, move away from Harry." The two guards couldn't move fast enough. "Did you think I wouldn't come, Harry?" said Voldemort in Harry's ear. Harry's head was pounding. "Did you think I would let them throw you jail?"

Voldemort looked around the courtroom. "You people are so pathetic. This is the only wizard in the world who can destroy me and you want to lock him up," said Voldemort. "How sad."

"Harry," he went on. "You are strong enough to free yourself from *my* bonds, show them your power."

"No, Voldemort," said Harry. "I'm guilty."

"You aren't, Harry," said Voldemort.

Harry was confused again. What was Voldemort going to do to him now?

Voldemort moved around Harry but stayed within the flinch zone, still close enough to grab Harry if he wanted to.

"Minister," said Voldemort. "May I address the court on Harry's behalf?"

"Are you giving us a choice?" said Mr. Goodhue.

Voldemort chuckled and glanced at Harry. "A Minister with a sense of humor. Interesting." He looked across the courtroom. "Sirius Black," said Voldemort. "Are you still under oath?"

"I am," said Sirius.

"Very good," said Voldemort. "Who is responsible for Peter Pettigrew, your Mr. Wormtail, returning to me?"

Harry took a breath to speak but Voldemort reached out and grabbed Harry's face. With a cry of pain, Harry hit his knees.

"Quiet, Harry," said Voldemort. "I'm talking to Sirius."

Voldemort let go and Harry got up, pressing his hand to his head.

"I'll rephrase," said Voldemort, looking back at Sirius. "Who escaped Azkaban and the Dementors and broke into Hogwarts with the sole intention of killing Peter Pettigrew who betrayed James Potter?"

"I did," said Sirius.

"And you found him," said Voldemort. "Didn't you?"

"Yes."

"So, why didn't you kill him?"

Sirius swallowed, glancing at Harry. "Harry stopped us."

"Harry did?" said Voldemort. "A thirteen year old boy stopped a wizard as powerful and as determined as you together with Remus Lupin?"

Sirius looked confused. "He told us not to kill him."

"He told you?"

"We felt it was his decision," said Sirius.

"You gave the decision of life or death of another wizard to a 13 year old boy?" said Voldemort. "Pretty irresponsible choice for your first decision as his godfather."

Sirius looked horrified.

"So I ask again. Who is responsible for Wormtail returning to me?"

"I am," said Sirius.

"NO," shouted Harry.

"Quiet, Harry." This time it was from Sirius.

“And why did Harry come to me the first time?” said Voldemort.

“Because you threatened his friends.”

“And why did he come back the second?”

“Because you had me in a cage,” said Sirius. It was almost a growl

“And why did Harry make the first contract?” said Voldemort.

“To protect me.”

“And why did he make the second contract?”

“Because I breached the first one by escaping,” said Sirius.

“And why did he come back to me yet again?”

“You threatened him with me again.”

“But you fought me, Sirius,” said Voldemort. “Why did Harry make the next contract?”

“You had captured Ron then Hermione,” said Sirius.

“Yes.” Voldemort glanced at Harry. “Harry defends his family and friends fiercely, doesn’t he?” said Voldemort, turning to the Minister. “Such loyalty and steadfastness is admirable.

“Why do you condemn such a wizard? Especially one with his power?”

The Minister looked skeptically at Harry.

“Do you not believe it?” said Voldemort. He turned to Harry. “Show them, Harry.”

“I won’t,” said Harry.

Voldemort grabbed his face, again putting Harry to his knees. “See how stubborn he is.”

“Let go of him, Voldemort,” said Sirius.

“So, it’s true,” said Goodhue. “Your touch hurts him?”

“Oh, yes,” said Voldemort, staring into Harry’s face. “Show them, Harry.”

“You can’t make me,” Harry managed to say.

“Can’t I,” said Voldemort. He let go of Harry and straightened. “Sirius.”

“Go ahead, Harry,” said Sirius.

Harry stood up and glanced at Sirius who nodded. He sent Voldemort a glare, twisted his wrists and the manacles burst open as if they were made of glass.

The courtroom gasped as a whole. The minister picked up his wand and re-affixed a new set on him. Harry looked down at them. The other set had been put on him by a mere guard.

“Go on, Harry,” said Voldemort.

Harry did it again and the courtroom gasped again.

“You see, Minister,” said Voldemort. “Harry could have escaped you anytime he wanted, but his sense of honor wouldn’t let him. He would have let you lock him away.

“He stands before you showing his courage and perseverance. He tells you the truth and you do not believe him. He proves his loyalty to you all and you shun him. He shows you his power and his honor and you still want to lock him up.

“I will not shun him,” said Voldemort. “He knows I want him with me. I have done everything in my power to prove to him that I acknowledge – admire – his integrity and want his allegiance, even made him my heir, and yet he still will not accept me.”

Voldemort turned to Harry and reached out his hand. Harry took a step back.

"You see, Minister," said Voldemort. "Harry was telling the truth. He has not joined me. My manipulations keep him tied to me but until he accepts me, I can not control him. And I will not, can not force him. He must do it of his own free will.

"So," Voldemort turned to the jury. "I have testified that Harry has told the truth. What will you judge him now?"

The courtroom was still silent.

"Voldemort," said Sirius. "The verdict has already been handed down. You know the law."

"I do," said Voldemort gravely. He looked at Harry. "So Harry has another choice to make. Stay here and be jailed innocently by people who do not want him. Or come with me."

Harry closed his eyes against the pain the impact of those words thrust upon him. *People who do not want him.*

Harry had felt unwanted most of his life – until Hogwarts. Harry glanced around the room. Where was Professor Dumbledore? Where were the Weasleys? Where was Hermione? Only Sirius was there. Sirius and Voldemort.

Voldemort moved behind Harry. Harry's head pounded.

"You know I want you with me, Harry," said Voldemort softly. "Everyone has deserted you."

The pain in Harry's chest felt like it doubled. Harry wanted to crawl away and die.

"I'm here. Sirius is here," said Voldemort. "Have you made your choice?"

"I-I just want to go home," said Harry in barely a whisper.

“All right, Harry,” said Voldemort. “I will accept that.”

But before Voldemort could grab him, Harry stepped forward. He looked at Sirius. “I’m sorry,” said Harry.

I’m getting out of this nightmare.

The cupboard under the stairs at #4 Privot Drive was unchanged.

Chapter 9

Exile

Harry sat on his little cot, leaning against the wall and his arms wrapped around his legs. He was shaking with shock and with dread, hoping that this house was still safe from Voldemort. It had always been before. He prayed the Dursleys wouldn't kick him out.

He listened for sounds of movement. Someone was rattling around in the kitchen.

Harry startled as the cabinet door opened suddenly.

"Harry?"

It was Aunt Petunia and Harry immediately started begging.

"Please Aunt Petunia, don't send me back," said Harry. "Please let me stay. I swear, I'll stay in here," Harry swore, "I won't eat much. I promise I won't do any magic. Just please, don't-don't-" Harry couldn't finish.

Aunt Petunia was looking at him with a combination of surprise and worry. She took a step into the room.

"What have they done to you?" said Aunt Petunia.

"They-" Harry choked off again. He wasn't able to say that they didn't want him anymore. "Voldemort-" Harry choked again. He wasn't able to say that Voldemort was tearing him apart with manipulation.

Aunt Petunia sat down on the cot next to Harry, staring at Harry. "So it's him again," said Aunt Petunia.

Harry looked at her and felt his eyes burn. "Don't send me away," he pleaded softly and felt a tear escape his eye.

Then his Aunt did something she had never done before. She reached out and pulled Harry into her arms, hugging him into her chest.

"Oh, Harry," said Petunia. "I won't send you away. You're safe here."

Harry sat there in her arms, breathing heavy to keep the dam of his emotions from spilling over.

Petunia pulled him to his feet, still with an arm around him and ushered him out of the cabinet and toward the kitchen. "I never wanted you to go to that school," said Petunia. "I knew something dreadful would happen. Poor Lily would have a stroke if she knew all you've been through."

Petunia pushed him into a chair. "Just sit, Harry," said Petunia. "I'll get you something to eat." She puttered around the kitchen. "So much for Sirius," she muttered.

"Sirius loves me," said Harry softly. "But he can't help me."

"Course he loves you," said Petunia. "So do I. And I *can* help you."

She had said it so off-handedly, Harry almost missed it. It was as if she said it all the time.

"You- but you hate me," said Harry.

Petunia looked at him and her face turned sad. "I could never hate my sister's son, Harry. Just as Sirius could never betray his best friend."

"But-" said Harry.

Petunia put a sandwich and a glass of milk in front of him and sat down next to him. She took one of his hands and stared into his eyes.

There was a very strange expression on her face. Then it vanished to be replaced with sternness. "Eat your sandwich, Harry," said Petunia and she got up and continued puttering around the kitchen, making it as spotless as it always was.

Harry stared at her. He remembered the tears he had thought he had seen in her eyes when Harry had left with Sirius. *Of course he loves you, so do I.*

"That's part of the protection, isn't it?" said Harry. He also remembered what Sirius had said. *You had to believe they hated you.*

"You treated me like that all those years so that Voldemort couldn't find me?" said Harry.

Petunia leaned on the counter and hung her head.

"Harry, don't say anything else," said Petunia. Then she changed the subject. "When Vernon gets home and sees you, I'm sure he'll throw a fit."

But she didn't sound as threatening as she normally did.

"He won't, will he?" said Harry. "You don't hate me. You were protecting me. Once I started going to Hogwarts, you treated me worse. Why?"

Petunia sighed. "Harry, just eat."

"Everyone thought the danger was worse," said Harry. "Didn't they? The worse the danger, the worse you treated me."

"Harry-"

"No," said Harry. "I know now. I understand." Harry got up and went to his Aunt. She turned to him. "You don't hate me," said Harry.

Petunia collapsed on him and started crying. "I'm so sorry, Harry," said Petunia. "We had no choice."

Harry hugged her. "I understand, Aunt Petunia," said Harry. "I know the truth now and-"

Pain exploded in his head.

"And now the spell is broken," said Voldemort.

Petunia jumped in front of Harry. "Get out," said Petunia.

Voldemort chuckled. He moved toward them. "Stand aside you silly girl," said Voldemort.

Stand aside you silly girl.

Voldemort had said that to his mother before –

Harry stepped around his aunt.

Voldemort grabbed Harry's face. "You can't run from me, Harry," said Voldemort. "Now there is no where in the world that you can hide from me."

Petunia stared in horror as Harry sank to his knees.

"Let go of him," said Petunia.

Voldemort looked up at her. "Oh, no, Petunia," said Voldemort. "No one wants poor Harry but me. He is coming with me." He looked back down at Harry.

"I won't let you take him."

Voldemort laughed, staring into Harry's eyes. "Bravery," said Voldemort.

But Harry saw what was coming. His aunt wasn't protected under the contract.

"I won't let anyone else die for me," said Harry softly.

"I will accept that," said Voldemort. He reached out and pulled Harry to his feet.

Harry screamed as Voldemort wrapped an arm around his chest. Then another scream of agony was ripped from him as Voldemort's hand hit Harry's scar.

"Did you have to touch his scar, Voldemort?"

"Yes, Sirius," said Voldemort. "I did. This is a new compound. I had to make sure I was Harry's focus so I could disapparate with him."

"I wish he'd wake up." Sirius sighed. "Please don't touch him," said Sirius with alarm.

“He can’t feel it,” said Voldemort.

“How do you know?”

Harry felt a hand touch his cheek. He didn’t feel pain. He couldn’t open his eyes. Couldn’t move.

Harry opened his eyes and could see the bedroom of his tent focus around him. He was alone. Harry was grateful as his entire body hurt like hell. With monumental effort and great care, Harry moved very slowly to the bathroom. Every muscle in his body screamed in protest.

He turned on the taps to run a hot bath.

Rowan. Harry thought.

He turned toward the door and called her. He watched the tub fill waiting.

“Rowan,” Harry called again, his voice hoarse and soft. He had never had to call her more than once.

When the tub was filled, Harry got gingerly into it and rested his head back on a rolled towel. He closed his eyes and called Rowan again. She didn’t come.

Had she deserted him too? Did Harry have no one left to count on? Had Voldemort been right? No one wanted him – except Voldemort. And now there was no where he could hide from him.

Harry tried to let the heat from the water soak into his aching body.

“HARRY!”

Sirius had screamed from the bedroom. Harry covered his head with his arms to block out the noise.

“Please don’t yell, Sirius,” said Harry, but Harry’s voice was just short of a whisper.

Pounding on the door, which Harry had locked made it worse.

“Harry, are you in there?” demanded Sirius. “Are you all right? Answer me please, Harry. I’ll break down the door if I have too.”

Harry’s arms tightened around his head trying to block out the shouts.

“Sirius,” Harry heard Voldemort’s voice which was considerably quieter. “Did you ever think that maybe your shouting is making his pain worse and he can’t answer?”

Harry touched his scar. *Voldemort.*

“There,” said Voldemort. “See. I am right. Harry, are you all right? Simply call me again if you are.”

Harry did.

“Do you wish to be alone?”

Harry called him again to say yes.

“Very well, Harry,” said Voldemort. “Call me if you need assistance.”

Harry relaxed as he heard them leave. He wanted to know what was going on but he also didn’t want to think about it.

He wanted Rowan to come and cry his pain away.

He wanted to go to Bulgaria.

He didn’t want to be Harry Potter.

Harry woke with start. He was still in the bath. It had cooled. He slowly and carefully got out. How he managed to dry himself and put on sweats without passing out, he wasn’t sure.

He had to lay down. Relying on walls to lean on, Harry made his way back to the bedroom.

Sirius stood up quickly from a chair and moved toward Harry.

Harry held up a hand. “Please don’t touch me,” said Harry, his voice was still almost non-existent. “I don’t think I can bear it.”

“Harry?” said Sirius, looking horrified.

“Not you Sirius,” said Harry. “The pain.”

“Is it that bad?”

“Yes.” Harry gently sat on his bed.

“Call Rowan,” said Sirius.

“I did. Three times. She didn’t come,” rasped Harry.

“Well your voice is so hoarse and soft, maybe she didn’t hear you.”

Harry carefully lowered his head to the pillow. “She would have, Sirius,” said Harry. “She knows when I call. When I need her.” Harry’s voice broke. He tried to clear it. “She’s left me too.”

“She wouldn’t,” said Sirius, looking down at him. “Call her again.”

Harry closed his eyes. “I don’t have the strength.”

Harry’s pain got worse and he put an arm over his head. “Tell him to stop,” Harry rasped.

“Voldemort, don’t come any closer,” said Sirius.

“Where is Rowan?” said Voldemort.

“She won’t come,” said Harry, submerged in the misery of body and mind.

“Harry, you aren’t alone,” said Voldemort. “Sirius is here. I am here.”

“I *am* alone,” said Harry.

“No, Harry,” said Sirius.

“Yes,” said Harry. Harry felt Sirius lean over him so he could hear “I won’t join Voldemort, but I can’t fight him. The Dursleys don’t hate me but they can’t protect me anymore. You love me but you can’t help

me. Everyone knows the truth but they want to lock me up. And my friends-“ Harry choked on the word. “Where are my friends?”

A large weight seemed to be pressing Harry’s chest.

“Harry,” said Voldemort.

“Voldemort, stop,” said Sirius. “Please don’t come any closer.”

“Harry, if you want your friends here, I will bring them.”

Harry was too weak to reply.

He woke to silence. The pain wasn’t too bad so Harry shifted position with a groan. He heard a shuffle.

“Who’s there?” said Harry.

“Oh, Harry!”

That was Hermione’s voice.

Harry turned his head and saw the two of them throw Harry’s cloak off them. Harry didn’t know whether he had the strength to scowl. Had Voldemort brought them here as he said he would.

“What are you doing here?” Harry voice was still a quiet rasp but it was stronger.

“What the hell do you think,” said Ron. “It’s the middle of the night. Think we had permission to come? We had to break into La Casa Black and steal your cloak then sneak away.”

“They’ve been keeping you away from me?”

“Yes,” said Hermione. “They even have Rowan caged. She’s been going berserk.”

Rowan in a cage? Harry closed his eyes briefly.

“Harry, you look terrible,” said Ron.

“Feels worse than it looks,” said Harry honestly. “I thought you guys had – well.”

“Oh, Ron, I told you he’d think that,” cried Hermione. “Harry, we’d never desert you.”

Ron clamped a hand over her mouth. “Shhh. Someone’s coming.”

Harry saw them disappear under the cloak. He closed his eyes.

Harry felt Voldemort enter the room. He didn’t stop until Harry cried out, then he backed away.

“You are still in great pain,” said Voldemort.

“Did you want something?” rasped Harry.

“Who were you talking to?”

“I-“

“Don’t lie to me, Harry. You know I can tell,” said Voldemort. “Ron and Hermione came, didn’t they?”

Harry just looked at him.

“That doesn’t please you?”

“You-“

“I didn’t, Harry,” said Voldemort. He seemed to be saving Harry’s strength by keeping him from having to speak. “They are guarded more than I think they know. If they made it here to you, I would be impressed.”

Harry said nothing to that.

Voldemort nodded at him. “I have said before, Harry. You have loyal and brave friends. They would not desert you. They are welcome here. They may stay. They know they have my protection through you by the contract.”

“You think-“

“Aren’t they still here?” said Voldemort. “Couldn’t they be using your Invisibility cloak?”

Harry closed his eyes. *He knows everything.*

Ron took that moment to throw off the cloak.

“What have you done to him now,” demanded Ron angrily. “What’s wrong with him?”

Voldemort didn’t look surprised to see them, if fact, he looked pleased.

“The pain of my touch and the magical transfers are getting stronger,” said Voldemort. “And Harry is getting older. Therefore it takes him longer to recover from them.”

“Then why don’t you keep your hands off him,” said Ron with feeling.

Voldemort chuckled and settled into a chair. “Ron, I had to make sure I was his focus to get him here.”

“He didn’t come here?” said Ron.

“No, Ron,” said Voldemort. “This is a new compound. He wouldn’t have known were to find it.”

“Then where-“

Voldemort interrupted Ron. “He tried to run away. But now he knows there is no where he can go that I can’t find him.”

Ron looked at Harry. “Where did you go?”

“He went to the Dursleys,” said Voldemort. “But he is not protected there anymore.”

“How did they get here?” said Harry. It came out more like a rasp. Voldemort’s closeness was draining him.

“We apparated to you, Harry,” said Hermione.

“How-“

“Harry,” said Voldemort, cutting him off. “Yes, the compound is sealed to all but my Death Eaters and of course you but I knew Ron and Hermione would eventually find a way to come to you so I opened it for them as well.”

Harry nodded his understanding, not liking that Voldemort had known what he was going to ask. He turned to Ron.

“What’s happening back there?”

Ron leaned over Harry. His voice had been so soft.

“What, Harry?” said Ron.

Harry swallowed hard and closed his eyes briefly.

“I believe Harry wants to know what is going on,” said Voldemort.

Harry nodded.

Ron looked hesitantly at Voldemort.

“It’s all right, Ron,” said Voldemort. “I’ll find out anyway.”

Harry nodded again.

Ron pulled a chair close to Harry’s bed and sat down. Hermione stood behind him looking weepy-eyed.

“Well,” said Ron. “My dad and Remus Lupin have filed for an appeal but it didn’t look good – you breaking out of those manacles.”

“That was to prove Harry’s power, Ron,” said Voldemort. “And his honor.”

Ron glanced at him. “I’ll pass that on.” He looked back at Harry. “It also didn’t look good that a Death Eater grabbed Sirius and disappeared with him.”

Harry turned his head to look at Voldemort.

"Of course I had to take Sirius," said Voldemort. "He would want to make sure Harry was all right. He is free to go anytime but I don't think he will leave Harry in the state he is currently in."

"I dare say," said Ron. "But now we know you tried to run, rather than go with Voldemort. My father can use that."

"Lord Voldemort," said Hermione.

"Yes, Hermione?"

"Your speech in the courtroom," said Hermione.

"What about it?" said Voldemort.

"Well it really caused a stir."

Voldemort chuckled. "I do have a flair for the dramatic," said Voldemort. "Don't I, Harry."

Harry just closed his eyes.

"But I mean, it all made sense," said Hermione.

"Why wouldn't it?"

"Well, was it all true?"

"My dear girl," said Voldemort. "I have little use for lies, as Harry can tell you. I find the truth so much more satisfying."

Harry closed his eyes again. The pain was bad and he felt he had little strength left to keep him conscious.

"I believe Harry is about at the end of his endurance, So I will leave now," said Voldemort. He looked at Ron. "Will you two be staying?"

"No we have to get back," said Hermione in a bit of a panic. "If they find out..." she trailed off.

"Harry," said Ron but Harry couldn't turn his head to him. Ron came around the bed and leaned over him. "Can I hold onto the cloak so

we can come back?" Ron must have understood Harry's problem.
"Just blink if I can."

Harry managed to blink once.

"Very good," said Voldemort. "Good night, Harry."

As Voldemort left, much of Harry's pain did too. Harry looked up at Ron. He was still leaning over Harry.

"Just hang in there, Harry," said Ron seriously. "We're with you. We'll get you out of this mess."

"We won't let you down, Harry," said Hermione, still sounding weepy.

Harry stared hard at Ron, trying to convey his gratitude.

"Thanks," was all Harry could manage in a soft hoarse whisper but the effort pulled him back into blackness.

Chapter 10

The Unexpected Ally

“What are we looking for?”

Harry almost groaned. What the hell was Malfoy doing in his room?

“I told you, Draco. The letters.”

Great. Both Malfoys were in his room. Harry wondered if he had the strength to tell them to get out.

“But wouldn’t he have kept his letters in his trunk,” said Draco. “That’s still at his house.”

“The letters we are looking for are the original ones that Lord Voldemort sent to Harry,” said Lucius.

“Why?” said Draco, slamming a drawer.

“I don’t know,” said Lucius. “And will you be quiet. If we disturb him, the master will have a fit.”

“He really doesn’t look well at all,” said Draco, sounding subdued.

“Yes,” said Lucius. Harry could still hear them shuffling through his drawers. “Everything effects him worse now. It takes him longer to recover. Be glad your name isn’t Harry Potter.”

“Is he really that powerful?”

“Yes, Draco,” said Lucius. “You would do best to remember it, too.”

“Is he strong enough to defeat the master yet?” said Draco.

“Lord Voldemort says no,” said Lucius. “But I’m beginning to wonder. He’s absorbed so much of the masters power – combined with his families magical strength, he very well could be. Find anything?”

“No, father,” said Draco. “His family’s strength? Did you know them?”

“Who James?” said Lucius. “They were all a year behind me but yes, I knew them. James Potter was and Sirius Black is very powerful. One must learn to acknowledge and respect wizards of great strength from families such as ours which both of them were.” Lucius sighed and softly closed a drawer. “I didn’t associate with Lily Evans as she was a mudblood.”

Harry almost sat up at that, but Lucius went on.

“But she was popular. Her powers were strong too which I believe could have been because magic had skipped a generation in her family.”

“What? Like someone was a squib?” said Draco.

“Yes,” said Lucius. “That can mess up the blood in a family line but it won’t effect the powers once magic resurfaces. And when Severus introduced me to Lily, I found her charming.”

“So you knew Harry would be strong?”

“Yes, Draco. When you were born the same year as the heir, I knew there was a possibility that he would go to school with you.”

“You told me to try to befriend him,” said Draco. It sounded like an accusation to Harry.

“I know,” said Lucius. “But the master was right, the boy is stubborn. Just like his father.”

“Was his father as arrogant as Professor Snape says?”

Lucius Malfoy laughed and Harry almost said something again but Lucius’ words stopped him.

“James Potter was far from arrogant, you could have even called him modest. Severus’ judgement is clouded by the animosity between him and that particular group,” said Lucius. “James knew his strengths though. What I would call self-confidence, Severus called arrogance. But James also acknowledged the strengths of others.”

“Meaning?” said Draco.

Lucius was quiet for a moment, as if thinking. “As you probably know, if you’ve been to the trophy room, James Potter was the best Seeker in the school.”

“People say that about Harry,” grumbled Draco.

“Well when it’s in your blood, you can’t help it, Draco,” said Lucius. “I may have spoiled you by getting you onto the team, as a father is like to do, but you are indeed a better Seeker than I could have ever been.”

“But you were a Beater,” said Draco.

“Yes,” said Lucius. “And in my sixth year I brought down the great James Potter.”

“Oh?”

“Indeed,” said Lucius. “I hit him with a bludger. Not an easy task. I could fly great in my day but James was a great flier. The odds of actually hitting him were remote. The bludger hit him in the leg and knocked him into one of the stantions which knocked him out and to the ground.”

Harry heard the shuffling of more paper, but was too interested in Lucius’ story to interrupt them yet.

“Bet he was mad,” said Draco.

“Draco everyone who plays the game accepts the risks,” said Lucius. “You know that and James was not mad. When he came around later, I went to see him. Sirius was with him.

“‘Come to gloat, Malfoy,’ Sirius had said to me. James had been sitting up, looking at me. I told him I had come to see what the damage was – with those two you had to fight sarcasm with sarcasm. James had laughed and admitted that he had a broken hip and a mild concussion then he held out his hand and shook mine.

'You've come close so many times, Lucius, I knew you'd get me one day,' James had said.

"Sirius had grumbled something, but James looked at him and said, 'Give it a rest, Sirius. Lucius is the best Beater in the school and I believe he knows it.' Then he looked me right in the eye and, still smiling, told me he owed me one.

"I told him I'd be ready."

"What happened?" said Draco.

"The next day, he came up to me very near the entrance to the Slytherin Common Room. I didn't know how he found me then, but now I know it was that map of theirs and he gave a box of perfectly heated butterbeer."

"Why?"

"That's what I said," said Lucius. "I told you I owed you one,' was all he said before he walked away." Lucius sighed. "But that's what I meant, Draco. He acknowledged other peoples strengths and talents."

"You admired him," said Draco.

"I did, Draco," said Lucius. "I very much hoped he would join us, but as I said before, he was stubborn too."

"Why do you hate Harry?" said Draco.

Harry was almost afraid to hear this one. He opened his mouth to say something but his damned curiosity got the better of him.

"I initially despised him because of all he took from me," admitted Lucius. "I had such power. People feared me, respected me although they did even after, if wasn't quite the same. I had been Lord Voldemort's most trusted Death Eater. I feared nothing but Voldemort himself. But he knew how loyal I was, knew I would do anything he told me to do so I didn't even have to fear him. He rewarded me well. That boy took it all away, even if he had no control over it."

“And now?” said Draco.

“Now.” Lucius sighed, closing another drawer. “Knowing everything he’s been through, seeing first hand what he can take and do, I honestly think that he *should* have changed his name and gone to Bulgaria.”

Harry couldn’t help it. His laugh came out as a snort, startling both Malfoys.

“Master Harry,” said Lucius. “Can I be of assistance?”

Harry shook his head as he pushed himself to a sitting position. He still couldn’t help grinning. “Mr. Malfoy,” said Harry, looking across the room at him. Malfoy was in front of a chest of drawers. “Do you know where Bulgaria is?”

Draco snorted on his laugh.

“I do,” said Lucius seriously. “But it wouldn’t make a difference. The master would find you.”

Harry only nodded.

“How much did you hear?” said Lucius.

“Enough,” said Harry, as he pushed himself to his feet beside his bed. He stared at his legs. They held him.

He looked to the door and tried calling Rowan again. Then he lifted his hand, unlocked his desk drawer in the office and summoned the letters. As soon as they hit his hand, he called Voldemort.

“You don’t know why he wants these, do you?” said Harry, looking down at the letters.

“No,” said Lucius.

As soon as Voldemort entered the bedroom, Harry hit his knees.

“Damn it, Voldemort,” said Harry. “You could have warned me.”

Voldemort chuckled. "I'm sorry, Harry, but I had hoped you'd have some strength back."

"I did."

"You *did* call me," said Voldemort.

Harry let Draco help him to his feet. "Yes," said Harry, leaning on the back of the chair beside his bed. "What do you need these letters for?"

"Leave us," said Voldemort.

"No, they can stay," said Harry.

"If you wish, Harry," said Voldemort. "Ron said they would be useful evidence for your appeal."

"You're trying to help?" said Harry.

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort. "It's what you want, isn't it? To be accepted again?"

"I'm not so sure now," muttered Harry. Voldemort was watching Harry closely. "Voldemort?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"It's pretty established by the wizarding world that Lucius Malfoy is a Death Eater," said Harry. "Why is Draco still allowed back to school?"

Draco perked up. "Good question," said Draco, looking to his father.

"Draco is still considered salvageable," said Lucius.

"Salvageable," echoed Harry and he looked at Draco. Malfoy laughed. Harry turned back to Voldemort. "And me?"

Voldemort sighed patiently. "The wizarding world is very complex in its present state – and I told you what must be done to correct it. You are an unknown factor within it right now. They simply don't know what to do with you."

"But you do," said Harry.

"Oh, yes," said Voldemort.

"So do I," muttered Harry and he looked at Draco. "Want to come to Bulgaria with me? I hear the Quidditch is great."

Draco grinned. "Sure, Potter."

"You can't run from me, Harry," said Voldemort.

"I know," said Harry. "You'll find me. And now you keep me prisoner by draining me daily. The only difference then being sent to jail is there wouldn't be any pain."

"It isn't my fault that they have caged your phoenix," said Voldemort.

"You could leave me alone for a couple of days, then so I can recover," suggested Harry.

"No, Harry."

"Then tell me where Rowan is and I will go and get her," said Harry.

"I don't know where she is, Harry," said Voldemort.

Harry wasn't sure if he believed him. Harry was starting to think that Voldemort was purposely draining Harry to keep him there. Anything to make the world think that Harry had chosen to stay with Voldemort. Then why the help with the appeal? Harry was confused again.

"I heard she was in Dumbledore's office," said Draco.

Harry glanced at him.

"You don't have the strength to apparate into Hogwarts," said Voldemort.

"You-"

"I have never been in Dumbledore's office, Harry. I would not be able to picture it," said Voldemort.

Harry looked at Draco. If Harry had help... He took a hold on Draco's arm. "Help me, Malfoy. Concentrate on me and we can-"

"Draco does not know how to apparate," said Voldemort.

"I do," said Draco, grabbing Harry arm. "Let's go."

Before Voldemort or Lucius could stop them, Harry concentrated on Dumbledore's office.

What a nightmare.

Harry hit his knees as they materialized in the office, the effort draining him further. He immediately heard Rowan's song, yelling at him with concern and irritation.

"She's beautiful," muttered Draco.

"Thanks," said Harry. "Help me up." Fawkes started to sing too as Draco helped Harry to his feet. "Quiet Fawkes," said Harry.

Harry moved to Rowan's cage. "I'm not sure if I can open it, girl," said Harry. "But I'll do my best." Rowan looked into his eyes and must have seen his pain because she started crying. Harry pulled out his knife and began working on the lock. He tried his command but it didn't work.

"Maybe Fawkes will help you," said Draco.

Harry glanced at the bird who only stared sadly back. "I don't think he can. He's at the end of his cycle, I don't know how much healing power he has left."

Harry kept working on the lock. He was starting to get dizzy.

"Why did Voldemort say you didn't know how to apparate?" said Harry.

"Because he didn't know I could," said Draco.

Was it a secret? "Did your father teach you?" said Harry.

"No, Harry. I did."

Harry startled at the sound of Dumbledore's voice and his knees buckled from the sudden movement. Harry looked up at him.

"This was a trap, wasn't it?" said Harry.

"Yes," said Dumbledore.

Draco helped Harry into a chair.

"Professor Snape told me Voldemort was keeping you with him by draining your strength," said Dumbledore. "I had hoped you would figure out that with help, you could get back. Which is why I sent Draco."

Harry sighed. "Well, if I'm to go to prison, can you let Rowan out. I'd rather go without this pain."

Dumbledore studied Harry with that searching look of his. "You need not go to jail, Harry." With a wave of his hand, Rowan's cage was opened and she flew directly to him.

When Harry was pain free, he looked at Dumbledore. "Why?"

Dumbledore sat down behind his desk. "Arthur Weasley and Remus have won your appeal. The Ministry of Magic will drop the charges if you will breach the current contract you have with Voldemort."

Harry blinked at him. "But if I breach it, can't he just come and take me?" said Harry.

"He can try," said Dumbledore. "But you are strong enough to keep him from apparating out of Hogwarts with him."

"I can?" said Harry. Dumbledore nodded. "But my friends—"

"He will try that too, Harry," said Dumbledore. "But you must be strong. You must accept that he won't hurt them."

"How do you know?" said Harry.

“Harry, Voldemort has been emotionally tearing you apart.”

Harry looked away.

“He wants you to see him as a father.”

“I know,” said Harry softly.

“He will not risk what he has already established with you by hurting anyone you care about,” said Dumbledore.

“Why not?” said Harry. “It never bothered him before.”

“He has threatened,” said Dumbledore. “But has he actually hurt any of them?”

Harry thought about it. Actually he hadn't. The only one Voldemort had actually hurt, aside from that one time he had hit Sirius with the Cruciatus Curse, was Harry.

“So you see, Harry, as long as you know and they know, Voldemort has nothing to use to control you. He has nothing to make you go back to him.”

Harry nodded. “But what about wizards honor, if I breach-“

“Harry,” Dumbledore interrupted. “You have loyal and resourceful friends. Hermione found a very interesting problem with that contract.”

“She did?” said Harry, sitting straighter. He could always count on Hermione.

“Yes,” said Dumbledore. “She remembered a minor little detail that was omitted.”

“What?”

“Neither you nor Hermione shook on it when she proposed the contract for you,” said Dumbledore.

Harry racked his brain, but Dumbledore was right. Harry knew he hadn't and Hermione was tied to the chair until Voldemort walked away. All she had said was she agreed. Harry smiled. The contract had been void this whole time. He frowned. Voldemort probably knew it too. And he let Harry believe... Manipulative bastard.

"So while the Ministry of Magic will think you have agreed to breach the contract, you, Hermione and Voldemort, if you chose to tell him, will know you haven't forsaken wizards honor."

Harry smiled again and glanced at Draco. Malfoy was smiling too. "Are you in on this?"

"Yes," said Draco. "My father is worried. He will not betray or renounce Voldemort but he wants me safe. He told me to do whatever Dumbledore says. I'm sort of like Professor Snape, only Voldemort doesn't know."

"No one is to know about the void contract or about Draco," said Dumbledore. "Especially Severus. He is obligated and I don't want to jeopardize his position with Voldemort."

Harry nodded.

"Draco," said Dumbledore. "Would you be so kind as to help Harry to Gryffindor Tower?"

Malfoy nodded, and with a grip on Harry's arm helped him out of the office. Once outside the office, Harry pulled his arm from Malfoy's grip.

"I'm alright," said Harry. "Rowan took care of it."

Malfoy looked annoyed. "Don't be so pathetic, Potter. You need all the help you can get."

"What-"

"Think about it," said Malfoy then he turned and strolled away.

Harry watched him leave and sighed. Just who was on which side? Harry was starting to wonder who he could trust.

Chapter 11

Defending Against the Dark Lord

Harry did what he was told and the Ministry dropped the charges. School started up again and it was only a week later that Harry got his first signal. He ignored it. The next day he got an owl.

Harry, why haven't you written to me? I know you have been cleared of the charges but we still have a contract. Are you prepared to accept the consequences of breaching it?

Harry didn't reply even though he wanted to tell Voldemort about the contract being void. He didn't want the physical evidence in writing however.

Harry had finished with his Transfiguration lessons. McGonagall was satisfied that Harry had mastered transformation and staying in his form.

He had circled the Transfiguration classroom during his last lesson, thrilling to the feeling of free-flying. Harry had been right. Soaring around on his own was much better than relying on his broom. If he ever fell off again, he'd never have to hit the ground. But then everyone would know. Just *why* was it such a big secret, Harry wondered. To keep it from Voldemort?

Harry had landed on McGonagall's desk and she held up a mirror. Harry realized he had no idea what he looked like. He peered into the mirror where a large, almost completely black hawk with piercing green eyes, stared back. He wasn't completely black, though, his personal marking (which all animagus had) was a silver discoloration of his feathers on his head in the shape of a lightning bolt.

Harry transformed and looked at Prof. McGonagall. "Can't seem to get away from that, can I, Professor?" said Harry.

Professor McGonagall had smiled at him.

Ron disappeared a week later. Harry was sick for the three days he was gone and Voldemort had signaled Harry each of those three days.

“Stay strong,” said Ginny. “Ron can handle it.”

“What if he puts him under the Imperius Curse again?” said Harry. “How could I face your mother?”

“Harry,” said Ginny. “All of us have accepted what we must do being Harry Potter’s family. Stop torturing yourself.”

Ron reappeared after those three days of hell for Harry, acting as if he had been away on holiday.

“All right, Ron?” said Harry.

Ron grinned. “Never seen him so mad, Harry,” said Ron. “He already knew the contract was void but he knew he couldn’t touch me. Dumbledore’s brilliant.”

Harry smiled but still didn’t like the situation.

Just before the Easter break, Voldemort showed up at school.

He apparated behind Harry in the Flinch Zone. Harry’s hand hit his scar.

“Can I finish my final, Voldemort?” said Harry, looking down into his potions cauldron.

“No,” said Voldemort. He wrapped an arm around Harry’s chest and a cry of pain ripped out of him. “Focus on me, Harry.”

“No,” rasped Harry. He concentrated on the classroom, staring fixedly at his cauldron. Neither of them disappeared.

“I can make you, Harry,” Voldemort whispered furiously in his ear.

Oh, no. Harry had forgotten about that. Voldemort’s prolonged touch and closeness was draining him already. Harry didn’t know how long

he could last as it was, but if Voldemort touched his scar, Harry would be helpless.

Harry sighed. "Then you'll have too," said Harry softly.

With a sound of disgust and anger, Voldemort let go of Harry and vanished.

Leaning on his table to support himself, Harry looked up to the front of the class. Snape was looking back at him.

He nodded at Harry. "Very good, Potter," said Snape. "If this was Defense against the Dark Arts, I'd give you full marks for that."

Easter break was a nightmare. Harry and his friends were kept at the castle but it seemed Voldemort was concentrating on Harry. He came several times and simply grabbed him. Harry remained strong though and Voldemort left each time without using his advantage.

At the end of the break, Hermione vanished. It hit Harry worse than when Ron had been taken.

Harry stared at his reflection in the mirror over the sink in Myrtle's bathroom.

Voldemort won't hurt her. Voldemort won't hurt her.

He kept repeating it in his mind. *But Lucius Malfoy-*

That thought wouldn't leave him alone.

Ron was hanging tough but he hadn't heard what Lucius had said. Hadn't seen the look on Lucius' face when he had threatened to lash her. Harry knew how Lucius hated Muggleborns.

Harry's hand hit his head. Voldemort's reflection appeared in the mirror behind him. He stared at the red gaze reflected back at him.

"It torments you, doesn't it, Harry," said Voldemort. "You can endure all the pain in the world, but you can't bear your friends to suffer."

Harry continued to stare at him, afraid to speak, to ask if she was suffering.

Voldemort took a step toward him and Harry turned around to face him.

"Come with me, Harry," said Voldemort.

"I can't," said Harry. "I won't."

"You will," said Voldemort. "You must."

Voldemort grasped his face and the arm Harry held out to stop him. The pain put Harry to his knees.

"You won't hurt my friends," Harry managed.

"No, I won't," said Voldemort. "But my Death Eaters-"

"You control them, Voldemort," rasped Harry. "You can stop them."

"To what purpose?" said Voldemort. "My son has forsaken me. If he doesn't care what happens to them, why should I?"

Harry felt that pain in his chest. "You know I care," said Harry softly.

"Then protect them, Harry," said Voldemort. "I have given you that power."

Harry's sight was blurring. Voldemort let go of Harry's arm and brought his hand to Harry's face. Harry closed his eyes as Voldemort's finger gently trailed up toward his scar.

"Come with me, Harry," said Voldemort. "Save Hermione from Lucius."

Harry was afraid Voldemort was finally going to use his advantage. He wasn't even sure if Voldemort had too, Harry was so weak.

"Just say the word and I will take you to her," said Voldemort.

Ron burst into the bathroom at a run and pushed Voldemort away from Harry.

"Don't listen to him, Harry," said Ron.

Harry slumped onto the floor and Ron dragged him away from Voldemort.

"Harry, look at me," said Ron.

Harry weakly raised his head. Ron stared hard into his eyes. Harry turned to Voldemort.

Voldemort looked annoyed. "As I have said, you have brave and loyal friends." To Ron, he said, "It's only a matter of time, Ron," said Voldemort. "He *will* come to me."

Voldemort disappeared and Harry collapsed onto Ron's chest.

"Harry. *Harry!*"

Harry sat up with a jolt, which resulted in a cry of protest from his body. But it had been Hermione's voice. He grabbed her into a hug as fierce as his sore body could manage.

"Are you all right?" said Harry. "Please tell me Lucius didn't touch you."

"I'm fine, Harry," said Hermione. "Please calm down, you're in enough pain."

Harry hugged her again anyway. "I was so worried."

Hermione scowled at him. "I know," said Hermione with irritation. "And so did Voldemort. Ron told me what happened. He tried to manipulate you again, Harry."

Harry looked down.

"He could have taken you," she scolded. "You were weak enough. You can't go wandering off by yourself like that and you have to get a grip on this. We all know the drill now, Harry."

But Harry still had trouble dealing with it. Especially when Ginger disappeared.

Harry pulled his cloak out of his trunk.

“Harry-“ said Ron.

“I can’t *not* do anything this time, Ron,” insisted Harry.

“He won’t hurt her,” said Hermione.

“I just have to make sure she’s ok,” said Harry.

“Harry,” pleaded Hermione.

“I’ve made up my mind,” said Harry.

He threw the cloak around himself. *What a nightmare.*

Harry apparated next to the cell. Ginger was inside. She wasn’t tied up and didn’t look hurt. In fact, she looked bored.

Voldemort approached the cell from the other side.

“You look bored, Miss Weasley,” said Voldemort.

“This isn’t going to work, Lord Voldemort,” said Ginny. “Harry won’t come.”

Voldemort studied her. “Oh, I think he will,” said Voldemort. “I’ve surmised that you are quite a bit more to Harry than Ron’s little sister.”

Don’t admit to it, Ginger, Harry willed.

“My family adopted him,” said Ginny. “He favors us all.”

Voldemort chuckled. “Nice try, my dear girl but I know Harry quite well now,” said Voldemort. “And I’ll even wager that he’s already here just to make sure you’re all right.”

Of course Voldemort knew. He knew what Harry would do before Harry did it.

"I bet he's standing very near under his invisibility cloak as we speak."

"Ron and Hermione wouldn't have let him," said Ginny.

"But Harry is stubborn," said Voldemort. "He does what he thinks is best." Voldemort paused to think. "Or perhaps he is nearby in his animagus form. He has probably mastered it by now."

"I wouldn't know."

"Wouldn't you?"

"No," said Ginny. "The whole thing is a big secret. No one knows what form Harry has chosen."

"Figures," said Voldemort and he chuckled. "No doubt Albus thinks he can just spring it on me, try to use it against me. As if I wouldn't know Harry."

"Couldn't he?" dared Ginny.

Voldemort looked surprised. "Oh, no," said Voldemort. "Knowing Harry as I do, I have already speculated what form he has chosen and can foresee exactly what he looks like in that form."

"Really?" challenged Ginny.

"Of course," said Voldemort. "Harry loves to fly, therefore he would chose a bird. With his powers, he could master a large one with little difficulty. He's had a sight problem all his life so I'd surmise he'd chose a hawk to compensate."

Ginny blinked at him. "You think?" said Ginny but she sounded genuinely interested.

Harry was astounded. *Well so much for the secrecy.*

Voldemort chuckled. "As for his appearance, his coloring is dark so he would be black. His lens would augment his eyes and make them

very piercing and of course he has the mark of a lightening bolt on his head.”

Ginny considered it. “Your theory is sound,” said Ginny. “But you never know.”

“Oh, but I’m right,” said Voldemort. “Aren’t I, Harry?”

“I told you-“

But Voldemort raised his wand to his head. It was so sudden, Harry cried out.

Voldemort looked at Ginny with smug pleasure and Ginny looked around.

“I told you, my dear, I know Harry very well,” said Voldemort. “Show yourself, Harry.”

“Harry, don’t,” cried Ginny. “Go back to school. Please.”

“Stay and visit with us for a little while,” said Voldemort. “You know I won’t keep you here.”

Harry swung off the cloak.

“Oh, Harry,” cried Ginny.

But Harry was staring across the cage at Voldemort.

“Let her out, Voldemort,” said Harry.

Voldemort raised his hand and the cage swung open. Ginny jumped out but Voldemort grabbed her before she could run to Harry.

“Let her go,” said Harry.

“And what will you give me?” said Voldemort, one arm around Ginny, his wand to her head.

Harry considered it. He looked at Ginny. She didn’t look the least bit frightened although she did look miffed at Harry.

"I'll stay until tomorrow if you take her back now," said Harry.

"No, Harry," cried Ginny. "I want to stay with you."

Harry stared at Voldemort. "That is what I offer," said Harry. "Or I leave now."

"Harry," said Ginny.

"Done," said Voldemort and he instantly dissipated with Ginny.

Harry sighed and moved to his tent. Had he done the right thing? Harry wasn't sure. Falling to a seat behind his desk, he wondered what Voldemort would try next. Then he saw the corner of a piece of parchment sticking out of his drawer.

Harry opened the drawer.

The map?

Harry stared at it. He pulled out his wand and held it over the parchment. "*Identify*," said Harry.

Instantly, all the little dots Harry had created on the map were labeled with names.

"I did it," muttered Harry. Every Death Eater in the compound was named and his or her location identified.

All Harry needed to do now was find the compound. He could lead the aurors straight to the camp. But how...

You can fly.

Harry looked at the map. Voldemort hadn't come back yet. He quickly pocketed the map then left the tent and went behind it. He transformed into a hawk and soared up over the trees. He circled, noting landmarks and other such key points so that he could sketch a rough map later.

A quick, dull burn on his head distracted him. Voldemort must be signaling. The pain was quite a bit less in his present form. Harry liked that.

He soared through the trees of the forest and noticed Voldemort in his chair by the fire. Harry landed on the back of his own chair and peered at Voldemort across the fire.

Voldemort stared back for a moment then laughed. "So I was right," said Voldemort.

Harry transformed so he was sitting on the back of his chair with his feet on the seat.

"You were," said Harry.

"I missed you, Harry," said Voldemort.

"Missed me?" said Harry.

"You know I enjoy our talks," said Voldemort.

"How amusing you find them, you mean."

Voldemort chuckled. "Always the cynic. But yes, Harry," said Voldemort. "Admit it. You miss them too."

Did he? "Well I don't miss the pain," said Harry. "But the conversations were always a challenge."

Voldemort studied him. "Yes, I have taught you much."

Harry sighed and dropped into the chair properly, running a hand through his hair.

"I can't dispute you there," said Harry.

"But you are very easy to teach, Harry," said Voldemort. "You catch on very quickly."

"Compared to whom?" said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. "So you have a point. I have not had anyone I wished to teach," said Voldemort. "You have made it very easy for me."

Harry glanced up at him. "All you do is ask questions or test me. I do all the work. Of course it's easy for you."

"Are you complaining, Harry?" said Voldemort with surprise.

"No," grumbled Harry. "I'm not stupid enough not to recognize how much you have taught me." Harry sighed and slouched back into his chair running both hands over his head. "I wish I was but I'm not."

Harry heard Voldemort chuckle again and looked up.

"Yes," said Voldemort. "And the Ministry knows how much more I *could* teach you which is why they are trying to keep you from me."

"That is my choice too," said Harry.

"Is it, Harry?" said Voldemort. "Or is their fear forcing you not to come to me?"

"What do you mean?"

Voldemort smiled at him. "Curious, Harry?"

"I'm asking," said Harry.

"And you remember that all you have to do is ask me," said Voldemort. "And I will tell you."

Harry lifted his brows expectantly.

"Harry, who is afraid of me?" said Voldemort.

Harry sighed. More questions. "Most of the wizarding world."

Voldemort nodded. "Who isn't afraid of me?"

"Dumbledore," said Harry.

“Go on.”

“Sirius,” said Harry.

“Sirius fear is on a different level, Harry,” said Voldemort. “His fear is for you. But he should not be afraid.”

“Why shouldn’t he?”

“Because you under my protection,” said Voldemort. “You know that, Harry. So who else doesn’t fear me?”

Harry only stared at him.

“Your friends don’t fear me,” said Voldemort. “They know I will not hurt anyone you care about.” Voldemort looked intently over the fire at Harry. “You don’t fear me,” said Voldemort.

“Don’t be so sure,” said Harry.

Harry had been expecting a laugh but Voldemort looked back at him seriously.

“I know what you fear, Harry,” said Voldemort. “And it isn’t me. When you have accepted your destiny, you will fear nothing. And that is what the Ministry fears.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Harry, the ministry is keeping you from me because I tell you the truth,” said Voldemort. “I tell you what they try to keep from you. They are afraid of you having the knowledge and the power that they don’t want you to have. I can give it to you.”

“Maybe I don’t want it,” said Harry.

“Why not, Harry?” said Voldemort. “You are curious. You always come to me when you want the truth. Why wouldn’t you want to know what I can give you?”

“Because the more I know,” said Harry. “The more you use to manipulate me.”

Voldemort looked surprised. "Who taught you that?"

"You did," said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled.

"So you see, you were wrong," said Harry. "It isn't the ministry keeping me from coming to you, it's my choice."

"But you did come to me, Harry," said Voldemort. "You are here now."

"I came to make sure Ginger was ok," said Harry.

"But you and your friends know I won't hurt them," said Voldemort. "Also knowing the ministry would be angry, you came anyway."

"You knew I would," said Harry.

Voldemort nodded. "But why, Harry?" said Voldemort. "Can you answer that question? Why, when you knew she was safe?"

Harry's brain hurt again. Harry had wanted to make sure she was all right even though Ron and Hermione kept telling him not too.

"You can't answer that can you?" said Voldemort. "You simply won't admit it."

Harry said nothing. He stood up.

"Stay with me, Harry," said Voldemort.

"I can't," said Harry. "You know I won't."

"I can make you."

"I know," said Harry. "But I don't think you will."

Voldemort got up and moved around the fire until he entered the flinch zone. He reached out and touched Harry's face. Harry pulled away.

"No, Harry," said Voldemort. "I won't." Voldemort's red gaze traveled over Harry's face. "Soon," said Voldemort.

"Volde-"

Voldemort's fingers trailed down Harry's face, shutting him up. Harry shut his eyes. When he opened them again, Voldemort was still staring into his eyes.

"It pleases me," said Voldemort, "That my son shows no fear. But it distresses me that I can not touch him without him feeling pain."

Harry stared into those red eyes. He had no idea how to respond to that. But Voldemort was waiting for a response. Harry could tell because he didn't let go and kept staring at Harry.

"Sorry," Harry was compelled to say, or rasp as it came out.

Voldemort raised his other hand toward Harry's face but didn't touch him. Then he let go.

Harry hit the ground.

"Very good, Harry," said Voldemort.

What a nightmare!

He heard gasps from people in the Gryffindor common room. Ron and Neville helped him up.

"All right, Harry?" said Neville.

"Yeah," muttered Harry.

"Ginny's a mess," said Ron. "Will you stop being an idiot."

They helped him up the stairs to the dormitory.

"Can't seem to break the habit of a lifetime," said Harry. "I'm OK."

They left him alone and Harry got into bed. Harry was afraid he was running out of ways to fight. When he looked at Voldemort, Harry was

seeing him less and less as a monster and more like a teacher. Had Voldemort changed or was Harry simply losing the battle? Fortunately, he was so exhausted, he went immediately to sleep.

Chapter 12

Desperation

A week later, the dizziness hit. Harry endured it as best he could, trying to get through his classes. He managed for three days.

After the second time that Ron and Hermione had to pull Harry up off the floor, Ron demanded, "Harry, what the hell is wrong with you?"

Harry swayed a moment on his feet, trying to force his eyes to focus. Someone came in front of him and lifted his chin, gently.

"OH, Ron," cried Hermione. "He's dizzy again."

"What?"

Harry staggered a bit as someone else grabbed a hold of his chin and turned his face.

"Harry?" said Ron, leaning close to him.

Harry tried but couldn't focus on his face.

"Ron?" said Harry.

"Oh, no," said Ron. "This is bad."

They brought him to the hospital wing and Madame Pomfrey put him to bed but Harry knew Madame Pomfrey couldn't help him. Only Voldemort could help him now.

That trap door seemed to open beneath him again.

Ron and Hermione kept asking him if they should tell Dumbledore. Harry told them no. But the next day the pain hit.

Dizziness, near blindness and now as much pain as if Voldemort was touching him converged on Harry.

To give her credit, Madame Pomfrey tried to keep Harry in dreamless sleep, but when ever Harry woke up, it was screaming.

“Get Sirius,” rasped Harry a couple days later.

“He’s coming Harry,” said Hermione, sniffing.

“I’m not going to make it,” said Harry.

“Harry, don’t say-“

Harry cut her off by crying out. He had reached out also and grabbed a hand. Harry didn’t know it was Ron’s but he grabbed it with all he had.

When the pain ebbed enough, Harry clutched the hand as if it were an anchor.

“I can’t win,” rasped Harry, clutching the hand. His entire body convulsed against the pain. Harry held on to the hand.

“Don’t let go of me, Harry,” said Ron.

But Harry’s grip fell off as Harry slid into darkness.

“Harry,” he heard Sirius leaning over him.

Harry grabbed Sirius’ arm. He couldn’t speak.

“Go to him,” said Sirius. “Ron found your maps.”

The maps? Oh, yeah. The maps Harry had made.

“Go to him,” said Sirius. “The aurors will find them. Get Voldemort to help you and the aurors will catch up.”

Harry, blinded by dizziness and pain, didn’t think. Sirius said go. Harry apparated directly to Voldemort.

“Harry?” said Voldemort.

Harry was on the ground at Voldemort’s feet. The tent and its occupants were a blur.

"Make it stop," rasped Harry. He tried to push to his hands and knees but couldn't.

"Harry," said Voldemort. "What is the—"

Someone rolled Harry over.

"Make it stop," Harry said again, his voice rough and soft. He could barely make out the red eyes as they studied him.

"When did it start?" said Voldemort.

"Last week."

"Harry, you stubborn boy," said Voldemort. "Is there pain now?"

"Yes," Harry's voice was getting softer. "Yes."

"Harry."

"I'm begging," said Harry, his voice almost gone. "Only you can help me."

"Harry."

"I accept you," Harry rushed on, choking on the words. "I need you. Please help me."

Voldemort stared into Harry's eyes. Harry couldn't see his expression, but he waited. Harry felt a tear trail down the side of his head.

"Harry, do you know what you're saying?" said Voldemort.

Harry reached out and grabbed Voldemort's wrist. He closed his eyes briefly against the pain. Then he looked into the red eyes. His eyes still wouldn't focus.

"I do," rasped Harry. "Only you can help me." Harry swallowed. "I'm begging. Please." Harry swallowed again and stared up at Voldemort, not seeing but knowing he was there. "Help me, father."

Voldemort looked up then around. "You all heard him," said Voldemort.

Harry wasn't sure who "you all" were, but he heard a murmur in the tent.

Voldemort raised his hand over Harry's face. Harry closed his eyes.

"Are you ready, Harry?" said Voldemort.

Harry couldn't speak. He nodded.

Voldemort's hand hit Harry's scar. Harry didn't even know if he screamed.

Harry woke to more voices.

"He's not going to believe it." It was Ron.

"I don't care what you say," said Hermione. "I think he planned it."

"Will you both be quiet," said Sirius.

Harry's memory came flooding back. *What have I done?* Harry didn't remember everything that had happened in Voldemort's tent but he knew he had begged Voldemort. He remembered accepting him. *I called him father!*

Harry groaned.

"Harry! Harry!" said Ron. "You did it."

Harry didn't want to face them. Someone gently took his hand.

"Harry, you're all right."

It was Hermione. Harry pulled his hand out of her grasp and put his arm over his head, covering his face with a groan.

"Harry?" said Hermione, puzzled.

“Hermione,” said Sirius. “He’s still in a lot of pain. Why don’t you two go and get something to eat. I will tell you when he’s stronger.”

“OK,” said Ron. “See you later, Harry. Good work.”

Harry heard them leave. *Good work?*

“Sirius,” rasped Harry.

“I’m here, Harry.”

He sat down beside Harry and picked up his hand looking down at Harry with concern.

“How bad is the pain?” said Sirius.

Harry closed his eyes briefly. “Manageable.”

“Harry,” said Sirius. Harry opened his eyes. “They caught them.”

“What do you mean?”

“Everyone in the tent with you was caught,” said Sirius. “They are all at Azkaban.”

“What about-“

“Him too,” said Sirius.

Harry swallowed. He’d be next.

“I’m sorry,” rasped Harry. “He’s beaten me.”

“What are you talking about?” said Sirius. “Voldemort told the aurors what happened.”

Harry groaned.

“That you tricked him into helping you over the threshold,” said Sirius. “So the aurors could catch them.”

Harry stared at Sirius. “Voldemort said that?” said Harry.

“Yes, Harry. You’re a hero again.”

Harry was confused again. Why would Voldemort lie? Did Voldemort think Harry was trying to manipulate him again?

Impossible. Voldemort could tell when Harry was in agony. Harry hadn’t been able to tell if Voldemort looked satisfied or pleased when Harry had accepted him (Harry couldn’t see). Voldemort hadn’t sounded triumphant either.

Voldemort had only said “You all heard him.”

Sirius was going on.

“There’s no one in the wizarding world who will believe you’ve joined him now,” said Sirius. “Especially after the aurors brought you back. I’ve never seen you in such bad shape, Harry.” Sirius looked like he wanted to reach out and touch him – as if he couldn’t believe Harry was alive. “Not even Rowan could help you.” Sirius’ voice broke.

Harry was still so confused, his stomach knotted. *What is Voldemort up to?*

“Did he-“choked Harry.

“File a stay of execution?” finished Sirius then nodded. “Yes. But I told him no.”

“Oh?”

“Voldemort said you would insist on seeing him,” said Sirius.

Harry closed his eyes. Another one of Voldemort’s test. It was a test of Harry’s

honor.

Harry sat uncomfortably at the Gryffindor table as the closing feast continued. Against Madam Pomfrey’s better judgement, Harry had been permitted to leave the hospital to attend the festivities. Try as he did, Harry couldn’t get out of it.

As he pushed food around on his plate, Harry could see and hear the boisterous and celebratory antics of the other students. Everyone was so carefree. Several looked at Harry as if they wanted to come over and congratulate him. Others looked at him with awe. Harry ignored these people. His housemates looked at him with distress.

He knew he looked like crap. He felt like it too. He hadn't eaten or slept since he had woken up and he certainly wouldn't ask Severus for potions. He knew he'd get the third degree from the professor if he did. Snape hadn't been at the tent with the others, so Harry was told – not that they ever arrested Snape. But Harry knew that the potions master would be far too interested to hear what actually happened to let it rest. Everyone else only knew what Voldemort had told the aurors.

All anyone got out of Harry was that he didn't remember most of it. Which was the truth. It was the parts that Harry *did* remember that caused all the distress.

But Harry was a hero again. He just didn't get it. Voldemort was back in Azkaban – with some of his most loyal, powerful Death Eaters.

A glance at the Slytherin table showed the group half-heartedly celebrating. It was a subdued sort of happiness that made Harry wonder if it was real. He searched the table until he spotted Draco. He was eating, nodding silently at comments from those around him but his expression was inscrutable.

Again Harry had to wonder just who he could trust.

"Harry, please eat something," Ginny begged.

"I'm not-" Harry took a sip of pumpkin juice and cleared his throat. His voice was still rough despite Pomfrey's potions. Luckily, only a select few knew it was from screaming. "Not hungry," Harry managed.

Harry felt Ginny's fingers stroke the back of his head. "I wish you'd tell me what's wrong."

Harry met her gaze only briefly before looking away. He couldn't tell her. He couldn't tell anyone.

“Fine,” she snapped, tossing down her napkin.

Harry watched in silent regret as she flounced away in anger.

Damn Voldemort. His summer was going to be a nightmare.

TBC in Harry Potter and the Trelawney Prophecy